



Everyone could use a little Sugar in their day

When it comes to treats, Sugar is well named. This eager, three-year old volunteer is often just the right prescription for many patients in the Rice Hospice program. “She is very calming when you don’t feel well,” said Linda Just, who knew that Sugar would be a good fit for the Rice Hospice Pet Therapy Program when she heard about it last fall. “She’s a very quiet dog, she doesn’t bark or lick. She’s very social and gets along with everybody – little kids, big kids, all ages, and even other dogs.”

Linda Just is a unit assistant in the Operating Room and has worked at Rice Memorial Hospital for 36 years. She and Sugar are one of six volunteer teams who graduated from the first Therapy Dog class in late 2009. The first step to being accepted into the program was to be interviewed by Molly Johnson from Canine Comfort for half a dozen openings. Johnson was looking for dogs with good temperaments who could follow simple commands (sit, stay, lay down). “Molly gave me pointers for things to work on in the next month so that Sugar could follow commands using hand signals,” said Just.

Next step, Just and Sugar attended Canine University where they had to pass the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen test. Just also had to complete the two-day Hospice Volunteer Training required for all Rice Hospice volunteers. She said, “I think everyone should take this course because it’s an excellent seminar that you can relate to life.” Finally,



Sugar is all set to visit patients as a Hospice volunteer in the Pet Therapy Program when she’s wearing her blue Therapy Dog vest and Rice name badge.

Just and Sugar had to pass the Therapy Dog Incorporated Tests during three observations at a long-term care facility. Therapy dogs must be able to remain calm when faced with all manner of distractions such as oxygen tanks, rolling food carts, loud and curious strangers, alarms and buzzers, elevators and stairs. “During the observations, patients would get excited to hold or even just see one of the dogs,” said Just. Happily, Sugar and the other five dogs all passed Canine University, earning the certificates which would allow them to make visits to hospice patients.



Linda and Sugar make a great volunteer team for Rice Hospice.

Sugar and Just make at least one visit per week. “All I have to do is say, Sugar, come on, let’s go to work,” said Just. “She’ll come wait for me to put her vest on and then she struts her stuff.” They’ll visit one to three patients each week. They usually make the rounds on Saturday, spending about 30 minutes with a patient. “We can spend up to an hour visiting, but when Sugar becomes disinterested it’s time to go,” said Just. “Most of Sugar’s patients have requested a small dog, one that can sit on their lap or curl up next to them.”

Therapy dogs provide patients with a diversion from physical discomfort and help relieve anxiety and stress. They can also reduce depression and boredom or give the patient a reason to open up and talk about memories of having their own pet. Human volunteers listen or talk, depending on the patient’s needs. “I’m kind of a talker, so I haven’t had any difficulty being a volunteer,” said Just. “You find common ground and mostly talk about connections. I listen to patients talk and if they can’t talk I sometimes read to them. Sugar looks at me, though, if I talk too much.”



Sugar visits with her friend, Roy.

Often, however, patients just want to hold Sugar and she obliges, quietly giving just the comfort they need. “Sugar’s first patient was in a lot of pain, and the one thing she always asked for was if Sugar would come and visit,” said Just. “We visited her for two months and Sugar would always lead me to her room. I had a lot of good talks with her, too. The last day we spent with her, Sugar was upset – I think she knew it would be our last visit.”

Just volunteered Sugar for the program because she had noticed how well Sugar interacted socially and brought comfort to members of her own family when they were ill. “I thought that if Sugar could bring anything to anyone who needed comfort, we had to try,” said Just, who rewards Sugar with her favorite treat – cheese – after a visit. “When she gets home she’s exhausted and doesn’t want to play with our other dog.” So she rests.

Although Just was thinking of Sugar’s natural ability to help others when she signed them up for the program, she’s found the visits to be rewarding, too. She said, “Even if Sugar wasn’t involved I would never give up volunteering.”