

Dogs-as-Therapy

~ celebrating 30 years of community service ~

By Lesley Pothan

This year the Club celebrated its 60th anniversary which is an amazing achievement. Equally amazing is that the Club's Dogs-as-Therapy program has operated for 30 years this year. Such tremendous milestones!



Margaret McNicol with 'Kerry' her Golden Retriever (right) accompanied by Wyn Fenton with her Schnauzer and Holly Rieger with her Salukis at Jindalee Nursing Home in 1993 (Photo: Nesta Triffett)



Margaret McNicol in 1992

How it all started

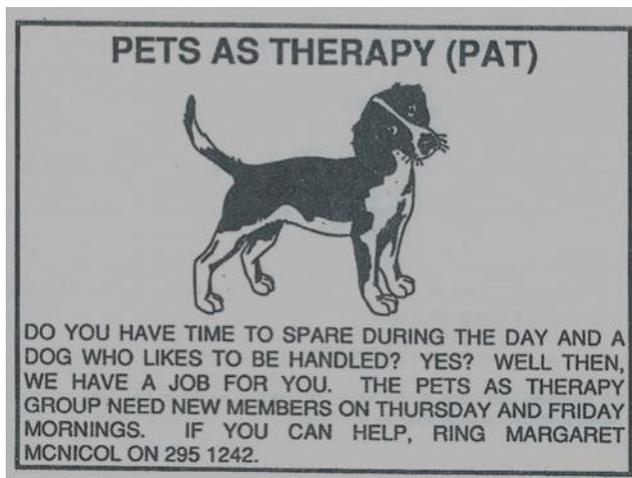
In 1988 Margaret McNicol became aware of the need for members with dogs of a suitable temperament to visit nursing homes in the Canberra region to bring some joy to the residents. She formed the Dogs-as-Therapy group and started off by making visits to Jindalee Nursing Home in Narrabundah. Over time other homes were included in the visits: Brindabella Gardens (now Fred Ward) in Curtin, St Andrew's Village in Hughes, Ebrai House at Mirinjani in Weston, Mountain View in Narrabundah, and Morling Lodge in Griffith.

Margaret McNicol (1911-1994) was an inspiration and great advocate for the Club, she founded the Club's Dogs-as-Therapy program, was made a Life Member of the Club in 1988 and served as President from 1990-1994.

At that time the DAT team used to joke that some of the dogs could do the visits by themselves as they had become so used to the routine. On one occasion, Margaret McNicol's Golden Retriever 'Kerry' proved they were right. While the group was chatting outside

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Brindabella Gardens Kerry went missing. Anxious searchers eventually found that he had gone into the nursing home and was doing a round of the residents all by himself!



Above: the early recruitment 'ad' for the program that appeared in the Club's magazine. Initially referred to as 'Pets As Therapy', the program became known as Dogs-as-Therapy in 1993.

In 1994 the Club created a new certificate to be given each December at the Club's Christmas and Annual Awards Party, to those members who have participated actively in the Dogs-as-Therapy group during the preceding year. The certificates are known as Canine Citizenship Certificates and are in memory of Margaret McNicol. The certificates were originally awarded to Club members whose dogs regularly participated in Dogs-as-Therapy or the Club's Demonstration team and who were therefore considered good ambassadors for the Club.

How it all continued

Joyce Thompson (below) took over the



management of the Dogs-as-Therapy group in 1994 and continued to organise and manage the program until last year when she reluctantly handed over the reins - after an incredible 23 years.

The Club has always had a number of dedicated people who give up their own valuable time to support and promote the Club's activities and Joyce is clearly one of those people.

During her time with Dogs-as-Therapy Joyce has had many much loved companion dogs who have attended the nursing homes with her. Her first was a beautiful Weimaraner called 'Cleo', who was very gentle and who really loved food in particular BBQ sausages. At fetes or anywhere there was food cooking Joyce had to watch Cleo carefully or she would be off seeing what she could find to eat or



Above: Joyce with Cleo during a visit to Melrose Primary School in 1998

pinching a sausage from someone's hand! Then there was 'Georgie Girl', a black and tan Dachshund, who came from Namibia (Africa) through all the massive quarantine demands required of the time. Joyce would often walk along the corridors of nursing homes she was visiting singing "Hey there, Georgie Girl".

In 2011 Joyce took 'Polly' with her to visit homes. Polly was a Keeshond owned by fellow Club member and instructor Jill Cottee. To keep the program going Joyce would continue to attend homes with the group even when she didn't have her own dog to accompany her.

When I first started with the program Joyce was

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visiting homes with a lovely older Border Collie 'Jessie' who she had rescued. Unfortunately not long after, Jessie's age caught up with her and Joyce decided it was time to retire her. Shortly afterwards, Joyce decided it was time for her to retire from the program as well.

During Joyce's time the team was warmly welcomed into aged care facilities and at the Malkara School in Garran. The team was a close knit group that supported each other and enjoyed their visits to the homes and providing comfort to residents. In this role Joyce proved to be very efficient but relaxed with a great sense of humour and great compassion.

Joyce has always been a busy, active member of the Club. She joined the Club in 1987, became a Level 1 instructor in 1989, qualified as an Obedience Trial Steward in 1992, became a Level 2 instructor in 1993 and qualified as an agility instructor in 1995. Joyce was made an Honorary Life Member in 1998.

Joyce joined the Club with her Weimaraner, 'Zoe'. They trialled successfully until Zoe was killed by a bite from a brown snake. Joyce's next dog, 'Cleo', was not happy in the trial ring but Joyce wanted to keep training without the stress of competing in a trial ring. So, Joyce started the Club's Companion classes. From 1988 to 2017 Joyce regularly took these Companion classes, specialising in Secondary Companion, on Wednesday and Sunday mornings.

Joyce served on the Main Committee from 1991 to 2005, had a break for a year and then went back on the Committee from 2006 to 2008. While on the Committee Joyce worked in many roles including minute secretary, librarian, housekeeper, and Junior Vice President. Joyce also served on the Obedience Training Sub-Committee for eight years from 1995 to 2003. During this time she took on roles such as Trial Manager and Demonstration Team Manager. Managing the Demonstration Team involved organising practice sessions as well as performances at schools and fetes.

On behalf of the Club, its members and all the residents of nursing homes we have visited over the last 30 years I would like to thank both Margaret for her insight into introducing the Dogs-as-Therapy program and to Joyce who continued and progressed the program for so many years. As well, many of our current teams have been visiting the nursing homes for many years and we thank them as well.

The Dogs-as-Therapy program today

Currently we have just over 20 dog and handler teams sharing the visits to five nursing homes: Mountain View, Jindalee, St Andrew's Village, Fred Ward and Carey Gardens. We get a number of requests to visit other nursing homes but would require more teams to be able to expand our service.

Below: A day in the life of a DAT dog ...
Photos supplied by Lesley Pothan



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Above: Lesley (back) with a DAT volunteer participating in the 'Reading with a dog' program

Kath McQuarrie who has been with the program for over 25 years is able to visit John James Calvary Hospital and the Canberra Hospital with her Schnauzers, Hope and Rocky (see the article in the last issue of The Good Companion).

During the last term of school this year we have piloted a 'Reading with a Dog' program in a primary school targeting children who are experiencing difficulties with reading. The children are keen to come and read to our dogs. We also receive a number of requests for one-off visits to schools or organisations such as ACT Carers. If we have dog and handler teams available we are always pleased to help out.

If you have a socially mature dog (over two years of age) with a calm temperament that likes visiting people and getting lots of pats, and gets on well with other dogs perhaps you would like to join us and become part of this very rewarding program. Dogs can be any size, breed or mixed-breed. Our dogs can range from the small Shih Tzu to the giant Wolfhound and anything in between.

If you would like to be part of this wonderful program please contact me via email at contact@actcdc.org.au.