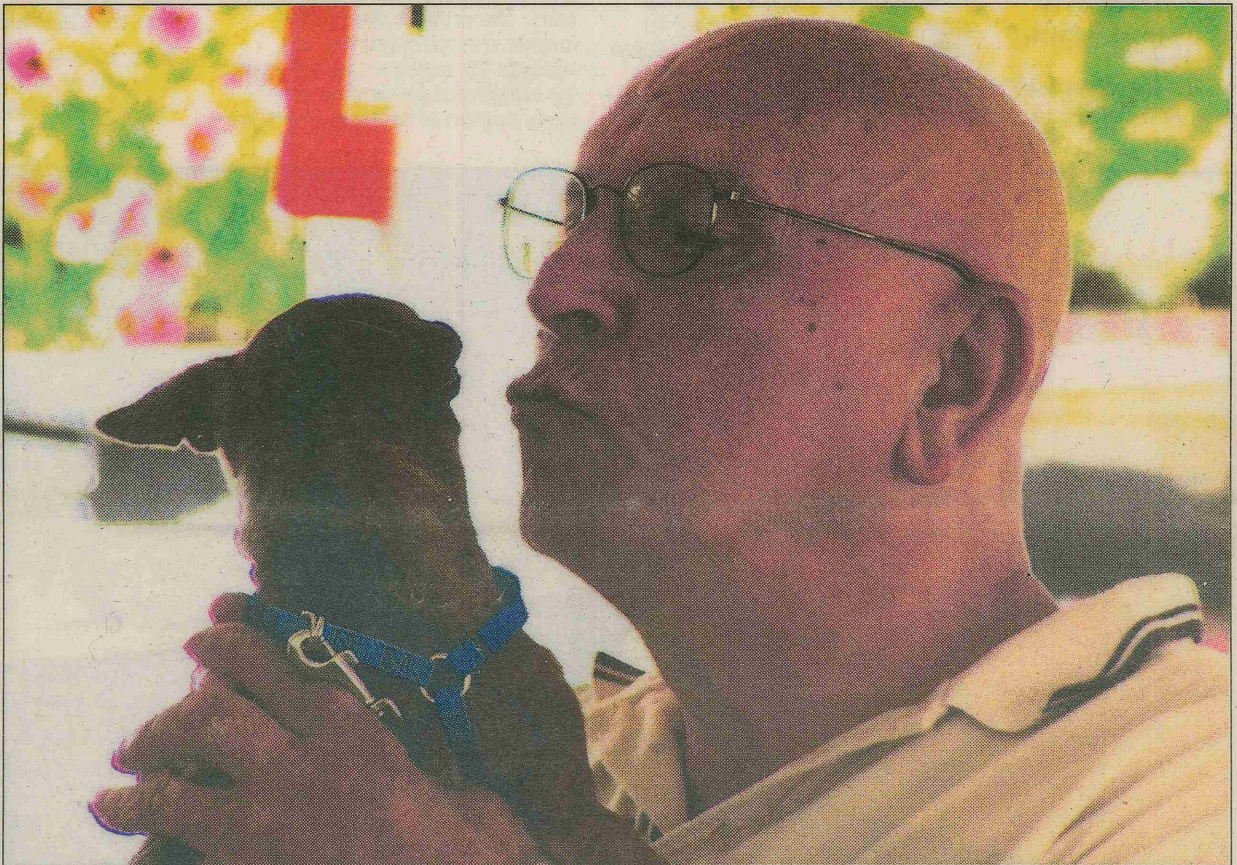


One kiss

can go a long way



John Murray, a resident of the Elmhurst Extended Care facility in Providence, gets some hugs and kisses from Rocco Puppy, a purebred Chihuahua who is currently taking the PPAT course with his master, Margaret Dunning.

A pet assisted therapy program trains dogs and their owners to bring smiles to the sick, elderly or troubled

BY BETH BOTTIS

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Brody and Halle McCarthy of Bristol are a brother-sister team with a pretty impressive track record, especially since they're just barely a year old. They have almost a magical ability to brighten the lives of those around them, from cheering up the elderly, to inspiring young

children to read and bringing some joy and meaning to the lives of those who are ill. Naturally, their mom, Karen, is extremely proud of them.

Brody and Halle are not your average siblings. Heck, they're not even human. In fact, Brody and Halle McCarthy are a pair of lov-

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ABOVE RIGHT: Charlotte DeVaney, Mildred Higgins and Ellen Murray spend time with Wally, a three-and-a-half-year-old Shetland sheep dog and his master, Robin Brackett, a second-semester student from Clinton, Mass.

THERAPY: Dogs bring smiles to those who need them most

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able golden retrievers who, along with Ms. McCarthy, are in the process of completing one of the state's only professional pet assisted therapy programs at the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI).

The D.J. Professional Pet Assisted Therapy (PPAT) University Certificate Program is the brainchild of Pearl Salotto, a Warwick resident who has been an active pioneer for the past two decades in an effort to make professional the increasingly successful world of pet assisted therapy. Using pets to inspire people is a form of therapy that is gaining popularity across the country in a wide range of areas, including nursing homes for the elderly, oncology wards for children with cancer, homes for troubled children and within schools, to assist with self-esteem and motivation. As Halle and Brody are proving, a little bit of love from a furry friend goes a long way in brightening a sometimes dreary world.

"Pets open up people's hearts and minds in a way no other treatment possibly can," Ms. Salotto said. "They help to motivate people and help with the healing process."

A furry field trip

On a steamy August afternoon, residents of the Elmhurst Extended Care Facility on Smith Street in Providence were jittery with excitement. As they assembled themselves out in the garden terrace, they chatted excitedly. Some were in wheelchairs, others used walkers. All had smiles on their faces, and with good reason. Today was the day they were getting some very special visitors, and just the thought of it brightened their moods considerably.

The team of "therapists" was gathering by the facility's front doorway, preparing to meet their "patients" and spend an evening getting acquainted. But instead of decking themselves out in white lab coats and carrying charts, these healers were donning leashes and collars. And they all had four legs, furry coats and drippy, doggy-drool smiles.

This was one of the first in a series of "field trips" that the PPAT class will take throughout the three-course certificate program. A part of Course II: Building on the Bond: Hands-On/Paws-On Learning, the pups and their owners were spending some time with Elmhurst residents and taking trips through the facility, to see how well they interacted with the

patients, staff and equipment around them. Elmhurst Extended Care has developed a unique partnership with the program, serving as a training site for interns, both human and canine.

The facility emphasizes the "Eden Philosophy" in its care, which means there is a strong focus on incorporating a range of living things into therapy, including working with plants, veggies and yes, animals.

"We really love this program," said Rick Gamache of Barrington, the administrator at Elmhurst. "Elmhurst is the only Eden site in the state, and this is a perfect fit. I know when I'm sick, my dog does all he can to cheer me up!"

According to Mr. Gamache, the interaction that the pets have with the patients is invaluable to their overall treatment, regardless of what is ailing them.

"It gives them that sense of responsibility to care for an animal," he said. "Something so simple adds so much to their quality of life."

Cheryl Fitzgerald, the director of clinical services at Elmhurst, agrees wholeheartedly.

"It's absolutely wonderful. It's bringing what they used to have at home into their long-term care, which has now become their home. Some residents get very agitated after being here and being sick. Once they see the dogs, they start smiling and going out of their way to pet them."

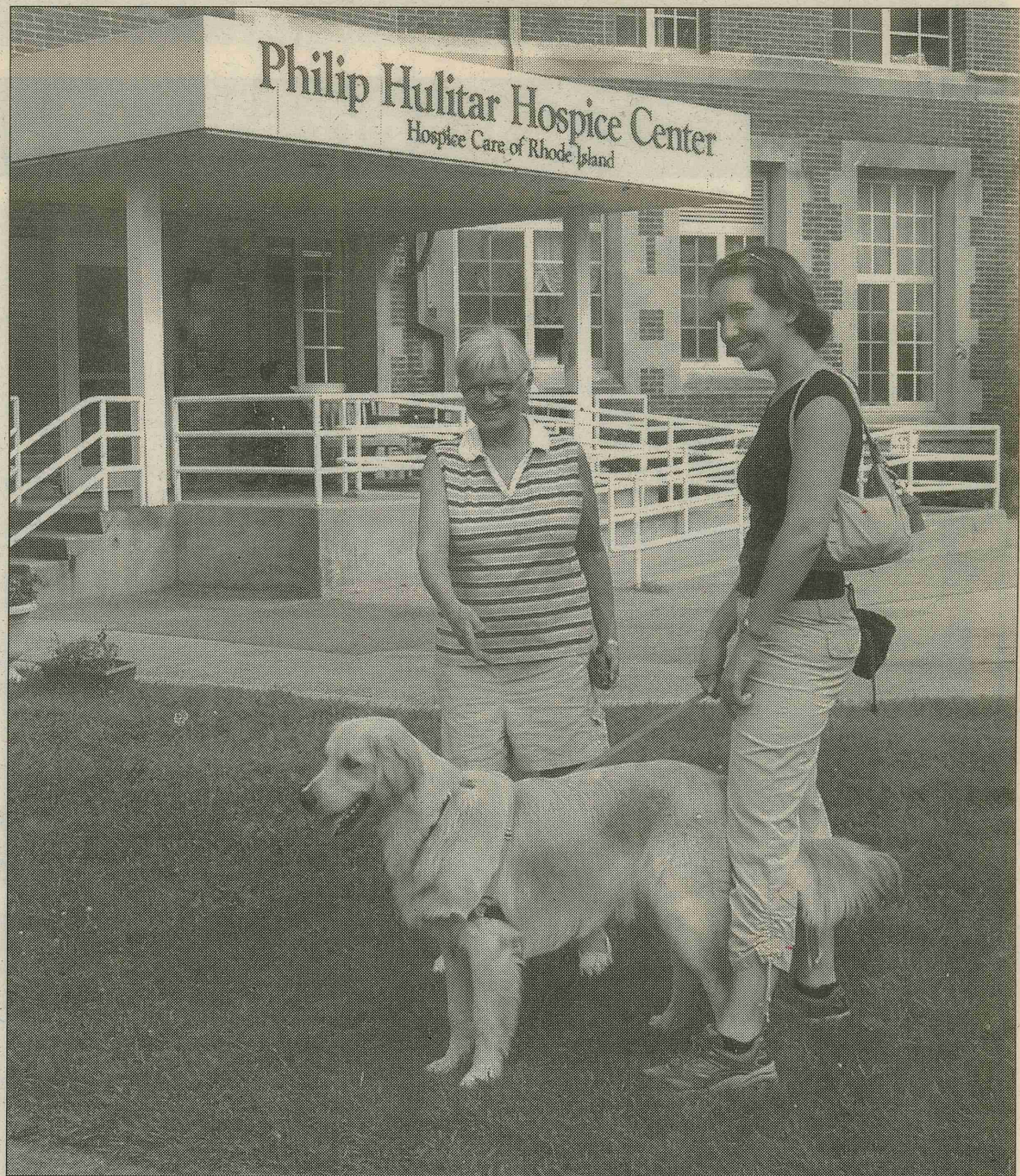
John Murray, a resident at Elmhurst, proved Ms. Fitzgerald's point clearly. His wheelchair did not stop him from forging a new friendship with tiny Rocco Puppy, a feisty and friendly purebred Chihuahua, who was absolutely loving being lavished with so much attention.

"My dog was born to do this," said Margaret Dunning, Rocco Puppy's owner. Though this was Rocco's first experience interacting with a "client," there were no nerves or first-time jitters. Rocco did his best to put a smile on the faces of everyone around him. And he succeeded.

From the kennel to the real world

The trip to Elmhurst serves as an example of what these animals are capable of doing, once they and their owners have graduated from the certificate program. Each student has her own goals for using pet assisted therapy.

Diane Calo of Greenville graduated from the course in March 2004 and now teaches some of the classes. She and her partner, Maxwell, a 3-year-old golden retriever, are already making tracks across the state, putting to



Pearl Salotto, PPAT director, with Karen McCarthy of Bristol and her dog, Brody. Ms. McCarthy, Brody and his sister, Halle, are in the early stages of the assisted therapy training process.

good use the training they received from the PPAT program at CCRI.

"Maxwell just has this way about him, he just steals everybody's heart," said Ms. Calo. She and Maxwell have worked their magic at a number of places, including Mt. St. Rita's in Cumberland, a retirement home for nuns and priests, Webster Avenue Elementary School in Providence, where they worked with special needs students in the third and fifth grades, and at a group home for boys, where they worked with troubled youth between the ages of 14 and 18. While their "clients" may vary, in age and personality, the goal of their work did not. The team walks into each of these venues and brings joy and love out of the most unlikely places.

"I attribute all of our success to Maxwell," Ms. Calo said. "If it wasn't for him and his wonderful disposition, we wouldn't be doing this right now. Since he was just 10 months old, we knew he was

something special."

Halle and Brody McCarthy might look up to Maxwell, their older and wiser golden retriever pal. Though they're just starting out, they've already got the main part down pat — making people smile. Ultimately, Ms. McCarthy, who currently works at a veterinarian's office and has a degree in education, would like to put their overall PPAT training and experience to use by developing reading programs for children involving the animals.

"I'd really like to develop a reading program for elementary school kids with low self-esteem," she said. "Many of them don't feel confident enough in themselves to read out loud in front of a classroom. The dogs would help them with that, by sitting with them and allowing the children to get comfortable reading out loud by reading to the dogs. This is what I am gearing my training towards going forward."