

Surprise at a Vermont Juvenile Rehabilitation Center

By Steve Reiman, Founder & President, Therapy Dogs of Vermont

A Vermont rehabilitation center for juveniles has been asking for TDV members to bring their therapy dogs to help the young residents. This is a fantastic opportunity and I hope certified TDV teams check this out. It is posted on our Website under Member Resources.

Many years ago, I was invited to bring the founding TDV dogs to this facility and speak to the students as one might to a high school class. I remember that there were 20 to 30 boys there at the time, aged 12 to 17. We had lunch with them and then headed to the classroom. They looked like pretty tough kids who had gone through some hard times and probably had caused a few problems.

I set up my video presentation and spoke for nearly an hour about the benefits of therapy dogs in the many settings they visit. I also spoke to them about what they might do after they get out. "Shovel the driveway of the little old lady down the street and never tell her that it was you who did it. You'll remember that for the rest of your life" I told them.

While I was rambling on, my two German Shepherds were working the class. Lily brought her small Frisbee to every kid to throw for her. Jordan had a tennis ball which she would bring to people to toss to her. But, she did more than that. Jordan always sought out the one in the room who least wanted to play with her and found a way to overcome that. Sure enough, there was a large older boy sitting in the back of the room with his arms crossed and a deep frown on his face.

As I was talking about slide after slide, I saw Jordan slowly go up to this boy and put her wet tennis ball on his knee. "Go away" he said, and she did – for a few moments. She returned and again gently placed the ball on his knee. This time he looked around to see that no one was watching him, and he took the ball and tossed it aside. The game was on! Jordan brought it back to him again and again.

Then I noticed the boy sliding down in his chair which seemed strange. The next time I looked, Jordan had put a paw on his knee. Oh oh, I thought; therapy dogs should always have 4 on the floor. But, I thought that the boy weighed about 300 lbs. and Jordan only 61. I'll wait and see what happens I said to myself. The next time I looked at the back of the room, there was Jordan fully in the boy's lap and he, with a big smile, was gently hugging her. It almost brought tears to my eyes thinking that it had probably been a long time since anyone or anything had shown affection to that young man.

Times have changed and TDV dogs must always be on leash while on duty and there is the 4 on the floor rule too. In this case, I broke that rule . . . but it was a long time ago.

Therapy Dogs of Vermont unleash smiles in many venues. This is certainly one of them.

