

# The Canine connection

New initiative moulds dogs' natural inclination towards caring and love for special therapy progr

By Barbara Aggerholm

Photography • Peter Lee

**PETER DONNER** reaches for Flo the golden retriever with a treat in his hand, but the dog doesn't take it. Not yet.

It's clear that Flo, a National Service Dog, wants to go to the soft-spoken man, but she waits while Donner completes the post-stroke exercise overseen by registered kinesiologist Madison Martin.

"Leave it, leave it, leave it," Donner says, and stretches a little further in his seat on the side of a therapy bed. "OK."

With that, the dog is at his feet. She inhales the treat that Donner offers her while he strokes her silky ears.

Flo is a graduate, one of only three, of the National Service Dogs' new Canine Assisted Intervention program, which matches service dogs with doctors, therapists and social workers in treatment settings.

The dog lives and works with Martin, 26, a University of Waterloo graduate with her own business, Xpansive Living.

Martin has 10 clients, nine of whom are recovering from a stroke; one with multiple

based charity that works with children and youth with social, emotional and mental health challenges.

And Holly, a golden retriever-yellow Lab cross, just joined the staff of the London District Catholic School Board, where she is paired with school social worker Laura Donelan, her primary handler. Holly will be working with both elementary and high school students.

The new National Service Dogs' program is the first of its kind in Ontario, and one of only two in Canada.

This spring, the Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, one of several local funders, gave National Service Dogs \$48,000 to help develop the initiative.

"We hope in 12 to 18 months to expand the program across Ontario and this time next year we'll see whether to take it out of province," says Danielle Forbes, co-founder and executive director of National Service Dogs whose head office is in Cambridge.

"The interest in this program has been extremely strong. Part of the excitement is the fact that one dog can potentially impact hundreds of individuals."

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"I think animal people that really up," Martin says you get from the

It has been two slim, hard-work the "doer" of the their home and stroke.

Before that, he spinal cord inju disc to add to hi long, sometimes wellness, says D

But those diffi their minds whe

Flo, a lively 2½ is a pleasant ren the couple, mar three sons have reminds Donner dark with his ov Toronto where h

Flo is a reward exercise. She's a how clearly Dor

>> board, as she watches her husband work. "Flo is like an incentive," she says. "He does a little better for Flo than me. "It all adds up."

Resting after taking steps at the parallel bars with Martin's assistance, Donner gazes at the dog lying on the rug in the Sunnyside Wellness Centre at Sunnyside Home where the couple, who live in Kitchener, come twice a week to do therapy.

"I think she's nice-looking," Donner says. "He likes good-looking blondes," adds Pat, laughing.

...

Martin, a compassionate, friendly woman, is committed to the National Service Dogs program and hopes other therapists will jump on board.

"I'd urge therapists to start integrating dogs more in their therapy," she says. "I'd encourage therapists to be creative."

As she walks down the hallway at Sunnyside Home, Martin and Flo are frequently stopped by residents who admire the beautiful dog. Some hesitate to touch Flo when they see the purple National Service Dogs jacket that marks her as a working dog.

But Flo is the kind of service dog that invites closer inspection.

"This is Flo. You can say 'hi' if you like. She's a National Service Dog," Martin explains to onlookers. "She helps people with their therapy."

Martin, who is also a full-time student at the University of Waterloo where she's working on her master's degree in neuroscience, began volunteering with National Service Dogs in Cambridge when she was an undergraduate.

"I've always loved dogs and what they do for people," she says. She first became a



Flo, at work here with kinesiologist Madison Martin and client Peter Donner, in the National Service Dogs' new Canine Assisted Intervention program, which trains professionals in treatment settings.

of sickness and had to give the dog back to National Service Dogs after six months. But after she recovered, she took Flo, already in training, in April of last year.

"I started doing therapy on a volunteer basis, helping people take their therapy from the hospital to home and I took Flo while she was training," Martin says.

"It was cool to see how people brightened up."

Even more remarkable was the progress they made when the dog was around, Martin says.

One client had aphasia, a language disorder resulting from a stroke.

"As soon as Flo was around, he could speak clearly to the dog," she says. "He talked to the dog, but not clearly to anyone else."

January, as scheduled. Martin got a call from a companion dog she was told. Call until she was placed.

Martin has a plan under Donner's direction. The organization how did I use Flo?

Martin uses Flo with clients who already had. She reads papers expect. She senses

The dog is calm a command," with Martin says. She client who's exercising

"Trained to do

course, shopping malls, walking trails, a favourite restaurant.

"I'm passionate about doing things in the community and encouraging people," Martin says. Flo makes the experiences more positive, she says.

The dog is especially helpful when they're in a busy mall, where a client may be nervous about walking.

"When you let them take Flo for a walk in the mall, they enjoy it and they're not nervous and they engage people," she says. What's more, shoppers are less likely to run into them when they have a golden retriever beside them, she says.

"Life shrinks after a stroke," Martin says. "There's stigma and fear of failure.

"Flo expands people's limits. She expands their quality of life."

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Photographs of smiling people with a black, yellow or golden-haired dog at their side cover a wall in the old stone house that is National Service Dogs' Cambridge headquarters.

There's Noah and Piper; Melissa and Chip; Brodie and Shade; Matthew and Comet; Caleb and Kane; Reg and Misty; Liza and Angel; Douglas and Scooby; Michael and Grover; Anthony and Hero.

In this house, set back from busy Cedar Creek Road with cornfields on each side, the photo gallery speaks volumes about the organization's success.

In a nearby room, a black lab named Patsy, scheduled to be placed with her family the next day, watches quietly as organizers set up for a weekend fundraiser.

Since 1996, National Service Dogs has launched four programs: the first for children and families living with autism.

Dogs were trained to improve safety and alleviate bolting behaviour common in children with autism. The dog, tethered to a

in basic obedience and placed them with children, adults and seniors with disabilities.

In 2011, the Skilled Companion Dog program was started to help veterans deal with anxiety and other issues related to post-traumatic stress disorder.

This year, the first three dogs, Flo, Carma and Holly, graduated from the new Canine Assisted Intervention program. KidsLINK is watching the results.

"We embarked on this pilot project of introducing Carma to our recreational activities with the children because we believe that it has the potential to generate an atmosphere that strengthens relationships and builds trust," says Sue Gillespie, chief executive officer of Carizon Family and Community Services of which kidsLINK is a division.

"It can contribute towards feelings of safety and provides an opportunity for healing and development for our children," she says in an email.

Tamara Leniew, program co-ordinator with National Service Dogs, says Holly, the dog placed with a social worker in the London school system, is already helping her make connections with students.

Shortly after meeting Holly, one boy, who had been reluctant to see the social worker, was at her door to schedule an appointment.

Two more professionals have been approved for Canine Assisted Intervention dogs, including a Toronto dentist who works with children with special needs, Leniew says.

"I met a director of a counselling agency in York Region that specializes in childhood trauma and she is applying for a dog," Leniew says.

More than 450 volunteers help breed and train Labrador and golden retrievers for the programs of National Service Dogs, an accredited Assistance Dog International training centre.

"It takes about two years to prepare a

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>> Cambridge, where they stay in kennels and receive advanced training for four or five months.

At the end of the day, volunteers sit in a lawn chair in the kennel and silently read a book to create a calm atmosphere for the dogs.

"Dogs are in a learning environment from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. at night. Then they pass out," Forbes says.

The dogs in the Canine Assisted Intervention program are trained like the others, but their temperament and overall behaviour are key to their success, she says.

Trainers take the dog to the new handler's workplace and home, working one-on-one with them. The dog lives and works with the professional, though National Service Dogs maintains ownership of all its service dogs.

National Service Dogs has seven full-time and three part-time staff members. The organization, with a \$650,000 budget this year, receives no government funding.

Organizations such as Cambridge and North Dumfries Community Foundation; the International Plowing Match fund and the Rotary Club of Kitchener-Grand River help finance the Canine Assisted Intervention program, says Laura Scott, fund development manager.

Forbes says the Canine Assisted Intervention program is well established in the United States and Europe. In fact, the University of Denver graduates social workers with service dogs. "We are not reinventing the wheel."

One day, Forbes hopes National Service Dogs can expand, train more dogs and reduce waiting lists of clients in all programs.

She nods at the wall in the board room where there's a drawing of a proposed 18,000-square-foot training centre.

"That's on my bucket list," Forbes says.

"We bought the property in 2006 with the goal of putting this on the property."

The economy and a change in a funding source's charitable status put it on the backburner. "But I see it in five to 10 years," she says.

"We all buy lottery tickets," says Leriaw, smiling. ☺

