

# Benefits of Pet Therapy for People *with Memory Loss*

By Amy Krause

Walter saunters into the House of Welcome (HOW) Adult Day Services day program on a sunny Tuesday afternoon totally at ease. He's been here before, and he knows he's got a job to do.

"Walter is happy to be here. He's been waiting all day for this," announces Walter's human, Mike Melinger, to the room full of folks who are living with memory loss. They are participants of the day program which consists of structured, therapeutic, small-group activities that foster socialization and friendships.

As Walter slowly makes his way around the circle, participants reach out to pat his head and stroke his back. Mike uses treats to lure Walter from person to person, encouraging him to "shake" and gently joking that he won't bite unless you're a Packer fan. Smiles fill the faces of participants as they make eye contact with Walter and pat his furry head. Mike explains that Walter is named after Chicago Bears great Walter Payton. This prompts participants to reminisce about their past pets, sharing stories with the group.

Mike and Walter, an 11-year-old pet therapy-certified Goldendoodle, have been making visits to the day program for the past eight years. Their involvement is very personal. "My in-laws both spent time here at HOW and had wonderful experiences. At the same time, Walter demonstrated so many qualities of a therapy dog—calm, attentive, obedient, interactive and friendly—so it was a natural fit to offer Walter for pet therapy," said Mike, who owns three Home Instead locations (Park Ridge, Skokie and Chicago) with his wife, Jackie. A long-time sponsor of the Center's annual benefit, Home Instead provides in-home care services to aging adults and their families, ranging from homemaker and personal care services to hospice care support. It helps meet a variety of care needs related to Alzheimer's disease, dementia, arthritis, Parkinson's disease, diabetes, depression and other conditions associated with aging, setting the tone for a natural partnership with North Shore Senior Center.

Researchers have long suggested that pets are good for us, offering health benefits such as lowering blood pressure and heart rate, reducing the stress hormone cortisol, and boosting levels of the feel-good hormone, serotonin. Director of House of Welcome Adult Day Services Cynthia Phon, LCSW, concurs with the research done on the benefits of pet therapy.

**"I see it every time we have a therapy dog visit—participants are joyful and have a great time interacting with the dogs and reminiscing about their past pets. And, on a clinical level, the therapy dogs provide sensory stimulation and promote socialization."**

Besides visiting participants of the day program, Mike and Walter also visit seniors in their homes and at nursing homes, and they participate in healthcare fairs. "When Walter comes around and does his thing, people interact with him, they laugh, and they share stories about their own current and past pets," Mike said. "I'm not sure who gets more out of our visits—me or the participants." He explained how running a business, no matter how fulfilling, is like running on a hamster wheel. Coming to HOW with Walter "gets me off the hamster wheel for a while and is a great use of Walter's time." After being attentive, interactive, calm and obedient for the 30 or so minutes they are visiting, Walter is mentally exhausted. This canine celebrity, who has his own Facebook page, can go home knowing that he's had a successful day of work. ■

