

Mabel's Magic

By day, Mabel prowls the fairways of River Forest Country Club, successfully keeping geese at bay. On Monday nights, she moonlights as a therapy dog touching the lives of countless humans. Here is Mabel's stirring story.

I've witnessed the magical reaction people have had to Mabel since she was a puppy. It was not uncommon for people to stop us on the street so they could feel the softness of her fur or pat her smiling head. It is amazing that people will trust a friendly dog so immediately.

"Let's go, Mabel," I invite as I walk out the door and head for work. "We have another busy day ahead." Our commute to work is short, but we always have to make time for bathroom breaks along the way. We arrive at the shop and I greet the crew with the usual "good morning." The reception is typical; a "good morning" is received back from all, along with an occasional smile. Mabel has her own way of greeting everyone. When she bursts forth through the door, she shakes her rear end with great enthusiasm. She runs from person to person, tongue out and tail wagging. Everyone's face lights up as he or she reaches out to pet her, smile and say "hello."

You've guessed it, Mabel is a dog. Someone once said, "A dog can do with a wag of the tail what no man can do with a hundred handshakes." Upon completion of her round of greetings, she settles down, has a drink of water and waits for the assignment of morning jobs. Her job is always the same, the pay stinks, yet she never complains or seems unsatisfied.

Mabel shares goose-chasing responsibility with two other dogs: Henry, her younger brother, and her close friend, Roxy. River Forest Country Club has not had a nesting pair of geese for several years now, as these dogs remain vigilant. The freedom from goose droppings at the club is priceless. The membership appreciates all the hard work that these dogs contribute to the quality of the playing surface. We hope their work won't be taken for granted, as it is easy to overlook their importance when a dropping problem is non-existent.

However, goose-chasing is not the only function these golden retrievers serve. These canine companions also serve as a great public relations tool. Individuals who would not normally interact with me if I were alone, frequently stop and say "hello" if I have a dog with me. This magical, approachable quality of dogs is not a figment of this author's imagination. Many physically and mentally challenged individuals are currently receiving service dogs for social purposes. Service dogs meeting the qualifications as social dogs are paired with individuals needing assistance. Social interactions can now be approached with newfound confidence and self-esteem.

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Mabel (L) with baby brother Henry at River Forest C.C.

I've witnessed the magical reaction people have had to Mabel since she was a puppy. It was not uncommon for people to stop us on the street so they could feel the softness of her fur or pat her smiling head. It is amazing that people will trust a friendly dog so immediately. We reach out and massage a canine's back even as we avoid incidental human contact. Strange as it may be, it seems that dogs are more capable of genuine love than we more highly evolved humans.

As I continued to observe the magical interaction of Mabel with humans whom I had never met, my respect for her grew. I have to admit, sometimes I was slightly jealous. People found her more interesting than me. She was MY dog; they were supposed to see me as the cool guy who owned the dog. Instead, I was the guy who accompanied the cool dog. But I was not going to allow my jealousy to hold Mabel back; I was going to find a way for Mabel to do her job here on earth. I was going to help her to help people.

Mabel has taught me more about life and myself than I will ever be able to teach her. She has shared more joy, laughter and true love with total strangers than I ever have. I can't imagine volunteering my time without her.



Henry, Mabel and buddy Roxy keep River Forest C.C. free of geese—and their droppings!

I had heard about dogs in health-care facilities helping people with their recovery. I decided to do a little research on the subject and found that there were several settings in which dogs were assisting people. Hospitals, nursing homes and rehabilitation centers were all seeking assistance from dogs. Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) was a phrase that I found myself seeing more and more. My research revealed many different settings in which dogs were employed for the benefit of patients. Many of the programs that I found were similar to traveling petting zoos. For instance, a number of facilities will allow you to bring in your dogs to visit with the patients. You take your dog room to room and the patients will pet and stroke your dog. There are also organizations for those participating in therapy. People suffering from strokes, gunshots, alcohol and drug addiction, autism and many other ailments benefit from emotional, physical, speech and recreational therapy that dogs facilitate. I became aware that there were many different avenues available through which Mabel could contribute.

Mabel and I decided that if we were going to donate our most valuable asset of time that we would prefer to be associated with an organization that was structured. We narrowed our search and began to investigate the Chenny Troupe. We knew right away that this would be for us when we read the mission statement, not because we are fans of mission statements, but because of its

content. The statement reads: "Dedicated to motivating individuals with special challenges through animal-assisted therapy programs using certified therapy dogs." This organization works closely with healthcare professionals to achieve client-specific therapy goals. I was excited; I knew that this was the way Mabel was going to help humans who desperately needed it. After contacting the Chenny Troupe office, we filled out an application and registered for the test. Successful completion of a pass/fail test was necessary to become a therapy dog. Only approximately 25% of the dogs pass this test the first time. Mabel was great; she passed on the first try and was on her way to a successful career as a therapy dog.

Chenny Troupe works with a number of different clients in a number of different facilities. The therapy dogs provide mental and emotional therapy to drug- and/or alcohol-addicted teens. They provide physical and speech therapy to brain and spinal cord injury and disease patients as well as to geriatrics, diabetics and other amputees. They provide emotional therapy to children who suffer with autism. We are continually finding ways by which dogs facilitate therapy to people suffering from numerous conditions. These dogs have a way of breaking the traditional barriers of therapy work, allowing for more productive and efficient sessions. They will never replace traditional therapy, but they do

enhance its effectiveness by allowing the client to see what is possible. Whether the therapy is emotional or physical, individuals will manipulate their states of being for the dogs in amazing and dramatic ways.

After passing the test, I was required to attend an orientation for volunteers where I learned some important information. At the orientation, I was also introduced to all of the programs with which Chenny Troupe was currently involved. We picked a program at Schwab Rehabilitation Institute based on its location, schedule and flexibility. Mabel and I were integrated into the group at our own pace, ensuring her complete comfort. Mabel was eager to work and was completely at ease after a couple of weeks. At Schwab, there are jumps, tunnels, hoops and a variety of objects for therapy-appropriate activities. These objects concerned me at first. Sure, Mabel had passed the test, but she had never been commanded "over" or "through." In time, she has learned what each one means and what is expected of her. She does not care for certain activities, being the

Princess that she is; she would rather not go "through" the tunnel. If the tunnel is made shorter, she may be coaxed through, but one never



Mabel's brother Henry has followed in her pawprints and is now a therapy dog, too.

knows. This information does not hinder us. Used correctly, the tunnel can be a positive activity. Possessing the information of Mabel's reluctance

about the tunnel, a client may feel challenged by the attempt to coax her through. The variety of objects ensures plenty of options to provide successful therapy sessions for all of our dogs. This is important because not all of the therapy dogs are experts at the same types of activities.

The focus of the activities at these programs is not about what tricks the dog can do. It is not a "dog show" and we are not a petting zoo. The focus is on the patients and their therapy. The therapy dogs facilitate the evening's therapy sessions. Sometimes Mabel performs each activity with no hesitation, other times she has her own agenda. "The tunnel" used to embarrass me, but I have witnessed many great moments when the dogs unveil their own fallibility. The clients seem to delight that these precious, lovable animals, like they themselves, are not perfect.

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total strangers than I ever have. I can't imagine volunteering my time without her. She makes some of the free time I have seem meaningless, because the quality of what she does in such a short period is so great.

Henry recently started his career as a therapy dog. He had to take the test twice. You see, Henry is all boy and he is distracted easily. Henry is young, but he is doing great. Mabel and Henry play wildly around the house and on the golf course, but when these dogs enter the hospital, it is all work. I don't like to speculate on a dog's mental capacity, but they are certainly aware that it is therapy time. They stride a little more upright and hold their heads slightly higher; they are consummate professionals. They are well-respected and the staff and clients all look forward to their arrival. There are times when it is hard to fight the traffic after a Monday's workday to volunteer. I always manage to muster the courage, though. After the evening's sessions, I always think how thoughtless it



Mabel (far left), Henry (far right) and Chenny Troupe colleagues pose with the jumps, hoops and tunnels used during therapy sessions at Schwab.

would have been to take away from the clients something that they look forward to all week, because I didn't feel like it.

Volunteering is something we hear more and more of. Our superintendents' association encourages it,

prospective employers value it and many people benefit from it. Involvement with your community increases a feeling of connection. Volunteering promotes a sense of self worth. You may think that you have little to give, but this is a common misconception. Time and energy are very valuable

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resources. The nonprofit organizations that are dedicated to improving the quality of life for others survive solely on the generosity of volunteers. One amazing statistic I have come across is that about 80% of the population is willing to volunteer; they just need one thing—to be asked. So, if you are involved in volunteerism and could use some help for your organization, ask a friend, neighbor or coworker to help out.

I would like to dedicate this article to all the hard-working dogs out there who keep our spirits up, day in and day out. Through the dog days of summer, our friends are always there for us, companions in the best and worst of times. Especially Callaway, who left this world on Christmas Day, 2001. I offer my sincerest condolences to Brian Baker.

A Word of Caution

Hospitals, especially nursing homes, will often allow pet owners to visit with patients. This type of visitation did not appeal to me and I would discourage anyone from doing this type of volunteering for several reasons: first, your dog is important to you. Your dog may be the mildest dog in the world, but a hospital is a strange place with many strange people and apparatus. Dogs need to be acclimated to this environment and there are professionals who can help.

Second, most facilities are understaffed. A facility may encourage you to bring your dog in, and once you're there, you are on your own. People dealing with patients need some training, some dos and don'ts. Turning someone loose inside a hospital with a dog can be a bad experience. You need to know some facts about the patient and may need preparation for what you will experience.

Third, there is the issue of money. Professional, established organizations ensure you have the coverage necessary under insurance. If you are unsure of coverage, check with any potential organization before your first visit. If your dog trips over an IV tube, and you are not covered under the insurance of the hospital, a potential bad situation arises. There are a thousand scenarios, each with varying outcomes. It is best you work with an experienced organization that provides coverage for you and works closely with the facility in a professional manner.



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