

Seize the Opportunity
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Making others happy through the efforts of volunteer work quickly becomes contagious. After my first experience attending a nursing home with a therapy dog, I was enthusiastic to return. Ted Slupik has been working alongside service dogs for many years. He made a visit to my school, Madison Junior High, to share with us his newly written book, *Sophie...Best Friends Are Forever*. Ted and his collie, Rosebud, were kind enough to allow two friends and me accompany them on a day of work. Their kindness continued with a second visit about a year later.

We coordinated our calendars and July first was open for everyone: Ted, his wife Bernie, Rosebud, Natalie Jordan, Blanca McCormack, and me. Our return to Alden Waterford Nursing Home would also include Ted's friend and dog trainer, Gail Diedrichsen and her therapy dog, Brody. This combination was particularly special because the Nursing Home recently was the venue for the first dog wedding between Rosebud and Brody that the residents attended the week before. To prepare for the visit this time, a special shopping trip was arranged for the residents to get gifts for the newlyweds.

The excitement that was expressed whenever the wedding was mentioned was radiated and shared. Many residents who had missed the wedding loved the pictures that the Slupiks shared. It was an interesting feeling when I realized that a simple event of a dog wedding could bring a group of people such joy. That is the profound impact dogs can have. As Natalie mentioned, *"After working with the therapy dogs I have started to see how much effect the dogs actually have on the people. The dogs may change how their entire week can play out, making them happier and energetic."*



It was great to be back for more visits. We made our rounds of the nursing home seeing some familiar faces, including Vater, a 104-year-old Chicago Cubs enthusiast, whom we were introduced to in our previous visit. She recognized us immediately and her smile told us she was as happy as we were about our return.

Since it was the week of the Fourth of July, we gave each resident a flag as a reminder of the visit. Some enjoyed just the flag; some just enjoyed the dogs, but most loved both. We talked to each person watching as it was clear the dogs had positively changed their day. *"My perspective has changed from thinking about volunteering as hard work to now realizing volunteering can help by simply being present and engaged,"* Blanca reflected.



Natalie, Blanca, and I went downstairs to the activity room, the first place we had visited, a year ago. We recreated our picture and saw yet the same smiles by the people there. Nancy had saved a picture with us from the year before. It meant that much to her. Seeing that picture displayed in her room meant the world to us.

Working with the dogs proved to us that little things can make a difference, considering that a dog, who can't speak, can make such a profound impact on someone. *"We met a very sweet lady who loved the dogs and also to sing. She asked if she was able to sing to the dogs and started singing her heart out. Her singing was beautiful and showed us that the dogs can make any day a good one,"* voiced Natalie.

Returning to the nursing home has altered our perspectives, knowing that we have started relationships with Rosebud, the Slupiks, and certainly, the residents. Also, my friendships with Natalie and Blanca have tightened. We have bonded through our volunteer work. I look forward to continuing volunteer work with the dogs. My calendar is now set with three events, including meeting rescues at the Collie Rescue of Greater IL picnic, at the Morton Arboretum Trails on the Trails comprised of 6500 people and 1500 dogs, and a Chipotle fundraiser to raise money for Lizzy's Fund, a organization that provides help for dogs that would otherwise not be adopted.

I am grateful and was fortunate enough to be given this opportunity that so many don't get to have. Even at a young age, it has provided me with a sense of compassion.