

Love: Tremor, an 8-month-old, 102-pound bull mastiff sits through the annual meeting of Pet-A-Pet, while owners Lorna and Arnie Johnson listen to a guest speaker who talked about the human-animal bond.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BEECHER

By JONI HUBBARD
STAFF WRITER
jhubbard@ecce.com

An elderly woman walked down the hall at American House, scowling at the 142-pound bull mastiff on a leash held by his owner, Lorna Johnson of Westland.

She glared at him, then without any warning, knelt the dog in the chest and said, "Get out of the way!" Johnson recalled being taken aback by the reaction, but even more baffled by the people who saw the incident.

"The staff was very excited. This woman had been there for two years, and that's the first time she ever spoke," Johnson said.

As a volunteer with the Pet-A-Pet program for the past 10 years, Johnson has heard dozens of stories like that one, memories of the pets she has loved over the years. Chauncy, the kick victim, has passed away, but Cricket, a female, and Tremor, and 8-month-old male, continue working with the elderly, school children and others who have benefited from animal-assisted therapy.

Memories like hers filled an entire meeting room at the William B. Costick Center Thursday evening at Pet-A-Pet's annual meeting. The organization provides support for volunteers who bring their pets to nursing homes, schools and other care facilities, as well as those who train dogs that assist people with handicaps.

Central to their work is the human-animal bond, an intangible link that appears to have physical and emotional benefits for both, according to guest speaker Dr. Sally Walshaw, an associate professor at Michigan State University's College of Veterinary Medicine.

"I'm sort of preaching to the choir," she told the audience of more than 50 pet lovers. "You already know about the human-animal bond. You see it every day, in many situations."

Walshaw, too, shared memories of her encounters with ani-

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mals, including a weimaraner named Jim, whom she met 26 years ago. A well-loved family dog, Jim was diagnosed with distemper, a disease that paralyzes its victims. Rather than have him "put down," the family asked for instructions about his care, then took him home.

"There are people who would not do this for a tiny poodle," she said, "so I had to ask, 'Why are you willing to do this for this dog?'"

The family's answer touched and surprised her. Their son had been a quadriplegic since birth, so they were accustomed to taking care of someone who needed that much help. But they didn't want Jim to suffer, so if it appeared he was in pain, they would call.

A week later, they did, but to tell Walshaw what she was walking. Several weeks later, when Walshaw visited the family farm, Jim was running through the fields. Doctors at the university theorized the dog's paralysis might have been something similar to Guillain-Barre syndrome, which renders human beings temporarily paralyzed.

"But you know, for me, science didn't cut it," Walshaw said. "To me, Jim was a miracle, and a tribute to the human-animal bond."

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Animal-assisted therapy has

PET-A-PET

had dramatic effects on people in nursing homes, emotionally disturbed children and psychiatric patients, she added. Walshaw has helped bring farm animals to nursing home residents, many of whom grew up in rural areas and shed tears of joy at the memories the calves and chickens evoke.

Randy Gasser, Executive Director of Woodhaven Retirement Community in Livonia, said Pet-A-Pet volunteers have been visiting there since 1989. "Some of our residents who really aren't engaged in life really open up," he said. "Don't ever stop doing this."

Gasser also praised the faithfulness of program volunteers, many of whom have been bringing their pets to the home for more than 10 years.

Woodhaven and Crossroads for Youth are both featured in a book of photographs and words, "You Have a Visitor," by Renee Lamm Esordi, who followed Pet-A-Pet volunteers for a year. At the annual meeting, Esordi photographed and thanked the volunteers for their support and friendship.

Karen Tuohy has seen firsthand how the organization helps troubled kids. Representing Crossroads for Youth in Oxford, she thanked Pet-A-Pet volunteers for sharing their pets once a month.

"We serve rough, tough teenagers," she said. "Every third Thursday, my juvenile delinquents look out the window down Draher Road ... and by the time you get to the house, the kids are outside waiting."

While some of the children, who have been abused and neglected or involved with the criminal justice system, are afraid of the animals, it doesn't take long for them to get used to the dogs.

"They love to have you come," she said. "You are a tribute to volunteerism."

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