

The Dogtor Is In: Pet Therapy Program at Stony Brook Southampton Hospital Is a Huge Success, Thanks to Dogs Like Cooper

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"Dog-tor" Cooper, with his owner, Eric Weston, as well as Robin Page, Stony Brook Southampton Hospital's Director of Cooper is part of the hospitals pet therapy program. CAILIN RILEY

The first thing you notice when you meet Cooper Weston is how he stares so intently into your eyes. It feels like a silent invitation to slow down and take a deep breath, like he's trying to communicate that he's here just for you, to listen, to be by your side.

There's no way of knowing if that's actually what he's trying to convey.

That's because Cooper is a dog.

But it's not a stretch to assume that could be exactly what's going on inside his canine brain. It's what he does for a living, after all.

Every Tuesday, the 8-year-old poodle/golden retriever mix clocks in at Stony Brook Southampton Hospital, for a weekly shift in which he is known, to his "co-workers," and patients, as "Dogtor Cooper Weston."

He even has official business cards with his title and contact information that his handler and owner, hospital volunteer Eric Weston, had made for him. Patients who receive a visit from Cooper during their stay at Southampton Hospital are given a business card as a kind of receipt. On the back of the cards, it says "you received a dose of joy on _____," with room to write down the date.

Cooper is part of a robust therapy dog program at the hospital, and is one of seven certified therapy dogs that visit the hospital on a regular basis. Because the program includes seven dogs, with five volunteers who own and handle the dogs, it means that, every single day, there is a therapy dog on the job at the hospital.

Robin Page is the hospital's director of volunteer services and patient experience. She onboards all volunteers, and works alongside Susan Appell, the hospital's pet therapy coordinator, who makes sure all the dogs have the proper certification.

Several different accredited organizations can certify therapy dogs — Cooper's certification comes from the Alliance of Therapy Dogs. Those organizations provide liability insurance, and ensure the dogs are appropriate for therapy work in public settings like hospitals, schools and libraries.

They make their rounds, with a gentle knock on patient doors, asking if they'd like a visit. Occasionally, patients decline, but the majority of the time, the answer is a resounding "Yes!" Cooper and the rest of the therapy dogs not only provide comfort to patients; they're also a big source of joy and an often welcome distraction for hospital employees as well. They light up when they hear the gentle clack of Cooper's nails on the hospital floors, and the jingling of his dog collar.

Cooper is very comfortable in his role. He seems to know and love his job, and he performs it well. He's also well behaved and comfortable in the hospital environment, obeying all of Eric's commands and lying down quietly when told he can relax.

Cooper may seem like a model therapy dog now, but his fate was far from certain several years ago. In fact, in the early years of his life, he was far from the ideal candidate for the job.

Eric and his partner, Robin Kerner, adopted Cooper from the Southampton Animal Shelter Foundation when Cooper was 3 years old. They had recently lost their dog, Magic, a female poodle who lived to the age of 16 and a half. After losing her, they started volunteering to walk dogs at the shelter, and let the volunteers there know that if any poodles or poodle/retriever mixes became available, they'd be interested.

Eventually, that call came.

"He just turned his charm on and started swiffing the ground with his tail," Weston recalled, smiling, when speaking of meeting Cooper.

The charm offensive worked, and they brought Cooper home, even with the warning from the shelter staff that Cooper had "a few behavioral issues."

An uphill battle ensued shortly thereafter.

"To say he was a bit of a monster would be an understatement," Weston said.

During their first year together, attempts at leash walking Cooper resulted in a partially torn rotator cuff and a broken finger for Weston. Cooper had a habit of picking up, with his mouth, anything he could find around the house — napkins, the T.V. remote, batteries. They later found out that Cooper, who originally hailed from Iowa, had been given up four times in the first three years of his life. It explained a lot, Weston said. He also believes it's part of the reason why Cooper excels as a therapy dog.

"Cooper is the story of perseverance and persistence," he said. "There's that seeking of attention. He gives so much, but he's a dog, he's getting attention, too. But it's almost like, for him, each person is his next home."

Bringing out the best in Cooper was the result of dedication and commitment. It took some time, but they eventually found a trainer who helped them find a way forward with Cooper. It was less about training Cooper, Weston said, and more about training his owners how to manage him.

"It's a function of if you're committed to doing it," he said. "You have to be really, really consistent."

As Cooper's behavior began to improve, Weston started thinking about having him certified as a therapy dog. He had become friendly with the owners of another poodle, named Charlie Dickens, who had worked for eight years as a therapy dog at the hospital, and was extremely popular and well-loved.

Because he was retired — or "free-tired," as Weston likes to call it — he had more time on his hands and wanted to dedicate much of that time to volunteer community service. It's been even more rewarding than he could have imagined, he said, while speaking about what typically happens when he and Cooper visit with patients.

"Some people just start crying," he said. "They're in pain, they're lonely, or they miss their own dog."

Weston and other volunteers in the dog therapy program never ask the patients any personal details about their health or condition, but often the presence of Cooper allows them to open up. People will share what's on their mind, and frequently talk about their own dogs. Cooper doesn't do anything special when he's there; he doesn't show off tricks or commands, and he isn't allowed to jump on beds or laps. But the results are still easy to see.

"They just go in and offer them comfort and care," Page said. "It's amazing, the smiles and the joy that they bring."

What Cooper and the other therapy dogs do for the patients is beneficial in a way that can't be measured. He does the same for the staff, Weston said.

"It's the doctors and staff that's most incredible to me," he said. "You can see the color change in their faces when they see him. I joke I have to keep the doctors in their white coats from rolling on the floor with him."

"It's beyond visiting patients," Page said. "They all go around to all the staff and all the departments and visit them, too. It brings their blood pressure down."

"It's such a great break for them," Weston adds.

Weston pointed out that Cooper's presence always makes him an afterthought. That's just fine, he said.

"I'll hear the staff yelling his name from down the hallway," Weston said, with a laugh, of when he arrives at the hospital on Tuesdays with Cooper. "I'm completely irrelevant. It's like, Eric who? It's just perfect."

Weston said he does, however, feel a lot of love and appreciation from Page and her staff, and praised them for the way they embrace all the volunteers, and make their experience top notch.

"I really appreciate how much the hospital embraces the volunteers," he said. "You really feel valued."

"There's such an endorsement at an organizational level," he added. "It seems like at most hospitals, it's very ad hoc, like they might have a dog come in occasionally. Everyone here is just so supportive of the program. It's run like a part of the hospital."

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