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Hospice angel

Therapy dog Baxter a balm for patients, who, like him, are near end of life

By **Caroline Dipping**, Union-Tribune Staff Writer

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Baxter isn't much different from the patients he visits three times a week at San Diego Hospice.

He no longer walks and must have his head gently positioned so he can better look into people's eyes. He is on many of the same medications as the patients he sees — Tramadol for pain, Amlodipine to regulate his blood pressure, a bronchial dilator to aid his breathing.

Indeed, at 19, Baxter is in the twilight of his life.

Part chow, part golden retriever and all love, Baxter is a therapy dog. With big, padded paws and tufts of fluffy, caramel-colored fur, he is often described as looking like a child's stuffed teddy bear. But as his shiny, onyx-black eyes gaze deeply into the face of everyone he meets, they radiate a magic that is no plaything.

"He's like a little Buddha," his owner, Melissa Joseph, says. "His mere presence sparkles and grabs your heart, and your energy refocuses and everything you thought was impossible is no longer impossible.

"He has the uncanny congruity of being at the end of his life with these patients who are also at the end of their life. He does something we cannot do. They sense that."

Baxter is one of nine therapy dogs in San Diego Hospice's Pawsitive Pals Pet Therapy Program. The program began in 2004 to bolster hospice's philosophy that no one should die feeling alone.

Typically, dogs and their handlers commit to volunteering about four hours a week for one year. Baxter has been ministering his own particular brand of comfort at hospice and other facilities for six years now, visiting thousands of patients and their families.

"He is truly magical," said Kim Heinrichs, manager of volunteer resources at San Diego Hospice. "There is a uniqueness about him and a softness and such an appeal to him.

"And there is something about Baxter's eyes. They are deep, dark and soulful. They are filled with love and compassion."

With pet therapy, the benefits are felt at both ends of the leash, Heinrichs said. Animals provide a source of comfort for patients and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

"Our four-legged volunteers and handlers have a remarkable way of touching our patients, producing smiles and making very special connections," Heinrichs said. "I look at Baxter, and I know he lives to love. He passes that on to all the patients and families."

To honor his work, Joseph has written a book, "Moments With Baxter," which is available on Amazon.com and, beginning tomorrow, at local bookstores.

"I decided Baxter is a hero, and heroes need to be remembered," Joseph said. "This book is a way for me to spread the word about not only Baxter but the value of dogs at the end of life for human beings."

Baxter's day starts with a wake-up bark for Joseph and her husband, Dennis Bussey. Because he can't walk, Baxter has to be picked up and taken out for his morning constitutional, then brought back in to have his teeth brushed, his eyes swabbed with a little warm water and his ears cleaned with rubbing alcohol.

He eats his breakfast standing up, with his two front legs braced on a stool that holds his bowl of food. And, like many a senior citizen, he takes his daily regimen of vitamins and antioxidants, including salmon oil, and his pain and



Therapy dog Baxter cuddles with San Diego Hospice patient Patricia Boyer. (K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune) -



Baxter gets his exercise through swimming several times a week at K-9 Cutting Edge in Carmel Valley. (K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune)



Baxter hitchhikes from owners Dennis Bussey and Melissa Joseph. (K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune)

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blood-pressure medications.

While Joseph and Bussey ready themselves, they prop up Baxter in bed and give him a braided chew toy. Later, Joseph will bathe Baxter with warm water and lavender soap. (Baxter smells less like a dog than a relaxing aromatherapy treatment.)

Several days a week, Baxter swims with a therapist for 30 minutes at Cutting Edge K-9, a physical therapy and aquatic rehab facility for animals in Carmel Valley. Although he can't walk, he can do a mean freestyle stroke, his rump bobbing in and out of the water like a baby hippo.

Today is a working day for Baxter, one of three to four for him every week. Joseph and Bussey swaddle him in blankets and strategically place pillows in the pulled-down back seats of their van for a comfortable ride to hospice.

Once there, Baxter is loaded into a custom-built red wagon that is padded and has a canopy to shield him from the sun. When Baxter enters hospice, it's as if the Dalai Lama has popped in for a visit. Work stops, nurses flock, doctors give up hope of gaining anyone's attention.

"Hey, Baxter!"

"How are you today, Baxter?"

"Nobody says anything to me," Joseph points out with a laugh. "He is the energy force that creates a gravitational pull that makes people want him in their room. They don't want me. They don't even know my name."

Hospice nurses are adept at matching Baxter with patients they feel would be most receptive to a visit. He never enters a patient's room without express invitation. Often, there is a waiting list for Baxter's ministrations.

Sometimes, Baxter stays with a patient just 15 minutes. More often, his visits last up to an hour and a half, with him averaging about three patients a day. Joseph positions him on the bed with patients as they like.

"Baxter's expertise is one on one," she said. "He is a spooner and a cuddler. He likes to have his paws around their neck and his head on their chest and be nose to nose.

"He's into eye contact and having communication with whomever he is facing."

Often it's not the dying; it's the family members who reap the most solace from a Baxter visit.

Gin Aguilar, an RN case manager at Scripps Mercy, had seen enough illness and dying in her three-plus decades as a nurse to know what to expect when her mother, Corazon Liwanag, was brought to hospice two years ago in the last stages of colon cancer. But her three daughters, who helped keep vigil, were ill-equipped with the grieving process. Baxter proved to be a balm and a source of strength to Aguilar's family.

"When Baxter puts a paw on you and looks at you, it is like he is looking at your soul," Aguilar said. "There was a strength he transferred to us. He helped us be strong enough to handle the grief.

"If he could talk, he would tell you, 'Miss me, but let me go, for this is a journey I must take,'" Aguilar said. "Baxter is the hospice angel."

Baxter's attendance was once requested at a high school graduation ceremony conducted at hospice for a mother too ill to see her son march in cap and gown at his school. After the ceremony, the son, who had not been formally introduced to Baxter but knew of his visits to his mother, gave Joseph a big hug and said "Thank you so much for what you are doing with your dog for my mom."

Joseph believes when Baxter can no longer work at hospice, it will be time to euthanize him. Her dog lives to work, she says, and if he couldn't do that, it would probably mean he is suffering, something she will not tolerate.

The fact Baxter has lived to this ripe old age is testament to Joseph's devotion. She rescued him from euthanasia at age 2. He was malnourished, had heart worms and exhibited signs of abuse when Joseph agreed to take him from a friend who had found him but could not afford to keep him.

It took Joseph six weeks to get Baxter to lose his fear of her and longer to nurse him back to health. A dog owner her whole life, Joseph immediately sensed a special aura about Baxter that was stronger than all the love combined from her other dogs.

The two are inseparable. Baxter used to accompany Joseph to Palomar College, where she taught writing, and for a time, he provided therapy at Pomerado Hospital. But when Joseph's husband, Bussey, came home one day with an application for Baxter to be a volunteer therapy dog at San Diego Hospice, the trio never looked back.

When Gin Aguilar's mother, Corazon, passed away after a month in hospice, Baxter attended the memorial service. "He lifted our spirits in a way that is hard to describe," Aguilar said. "I wish people could have that experience. I wish we could clone Baxter."

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For the past six years, Baxter has been a volunteer therapy dog at San Diego Hospice. (K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune)

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Therapy dogs must be trained through a certified organization before they can work in a hospice setting. San Diego Hospice has numerous volunteer opportunities, including spots for therapy dogs and their handlers. For more information, call (619) 688-1600 or visit sdhospice.org.

BAXTER BOOK SIGNINGS

Baxter and owners Melissa Joseph and Dennis Bussey will be at the following book signings:

■ 2 p.m. Saturday at Borders, 11160 Rancho Carmel Drive, Carmel Mountain Ranch

■ 11 a.m. June 12 at The Remington Club, 16925 Hierba Drive, Rancho Bernardo

■ 7:30 p.m. June 16 at Warwick's Books, 7812 Girard Ave., La Jolla

■ 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Aug. 1 at Earthsong Books, 1440 Camino Del Mar, Del Mar

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