

NEWS

A case of puppy love for memory center

NEW CEO: Officials say Canine Executive Officer Buster is good for staff and residents.

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JENNA HUNT / For The Valley Chronicle

It's puppy love all over the place at Desert Hills Memory Care Center in Hemet.

The center, an assisted-living facility for people with Alzheimer's and other memory-loss diseases, recently adopted a dog named Buster, who has made himself at home and spreads his love to residents and staff.

Buster found his new home in July when an animal therapy volunteer told the center about a dog she had met at Ramona Humane Society. Trudy Hendricks, the center's executive director, wasn't so sure about a dog, but they asked the volunteer to bring him by so they could meet him and introduce him to the patients. Hendricks said that they were impressed with the dog's calm, but inquisitive manner. He quickly earned a place in the hearts of the staff and the center's 45 residents and is now living at the center. He is also trying to be friends with the house cat Snoball, but is currently being ignored.

The residents at the center range in age from 58 to 96 years old with all levels of memory loss and some with medical injuries, Hendricks said. Buster seems to know intuitively how to approach the seniors, she said.

"He's very dialed into it," she said. "It's good for the residents to see a living creature just hanging out."

Zen Sorenson, 56, who was in an accident in 1988 that caused brain injury, loves to carry treats for Buster in her bag. She was injured rescuing children from a truck whose brakes went out, Hendricks said.

"She's a hero — she's an amazing woman," Hendricks said of Sorenson.

Orvil Higgs, a resident, said he enjoys Buster when he'll let him pet him. He usually has to tempt him with sausage at breakfast.

Buster, who looks like a mix of Labrador retriever and boxer, is often found on the couch in the front reception area, a cozy place where he jumps off to greet visitors and new residents. His second relaxation location is found in Hendricks' office, but he is free to roam throughout the community.

"He goes all over," Hendricks said. "(His presence with new residents) comforts people in a way that we can't calm them."

According to the center's Web site, Buster is a CEO — canine executive officer — and has free rein of the facilities. His favorite place is the dining room, where residents sneak him food, Hendricks said. His job description on the Web site says that he is "responsible for rolling in the grass, sleeping (on the couch), greeting staff members and guiding visitors through our campus."

He does his job very well and has become a reason for many residents to smile every day.



FURRY FRIEND: Zen Sorenson, 56, a resident at Desert Hills Memory Care Center in Hemet, feeds a treat to Buster. Buster is a companion dog who was adopted from the Ramona Humane Society in San Jacinto.
JENNA HUNT / For The Valley Chronicle

“He just has a natural talent and a really great spirit,” Hendricks said.

Buster, who is 7 years old, is especially fond of women and is still getting used to men at the center. Hendricks said he warms up slowly, but is somewhat skittish with some men. He loves children and babies when they come to visit relatives at the center, she said. He also gets along great with other dogs and had fun when visitors brought their dogs to the water play day this past summer where he was the doggy host for 10 dogs. A total of 40 families attended the event.

The center does not know Buster’s history or why he may be skittish, but they think with love and time he will find his new home a place of warmth and happiness.

“We’ve been trying to piece together who Buster really is,” Hendricks said. “It’s going to take time.”