

Meet Vi the therapy dog • Teaching kittens to play nice • Inspiring people

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Page 26

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birds of Parrot Garden

Seeing animals  
as individuals

Bitty Bear's cross-  
country trip home



# Canine Caregiver

*A resident therapy dog  
helps children living  
with chronic illness*

**Story by Jodi Helmer  
Photos by Sarah Ause**



*Madison Secrest, age five,  
has neurofibromatosis and  
is getting treatment at NIH.*





*Jesibeth Rodriguez, age seven, reads to Vi. Jesibeth has a blood disorder.*

**T**racy Wilcox used to dread telling her nine-year-old daughter, Breana, that it was time to pack her bags and return to the hospital for medical treatments. “She would burst into tears when I told her we had to go back to the hospital,” Tracy recalls. “It would break my heart.”

Breana was used to hopping up on the examination table and being stuck with needles. She was just three when she was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that causes chronic fevers and pain, and hospital visits had become second nature for the pint-sized patient. For Breana, the hardest part of treatment was traveling a thousand miles from her Massachusetts home to receive care at the world-class National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. “We do it because it’s the best shot Breana has for getting better,” Tracy explains.

For the past seven years, mother and daughter have boarded a plane from Massachusetts to Maryland every few months. Sometimes, they’re gone just 24 hours. Other times, Breana spends an entire week in and out of medical appointments at NIH. While Breana is receiving care at NIH, the pair stays at The Children’s Inn, a nonprofit residence on the hospital campus where families receive free room and board during treatment.

Even though The Children’s Inn has a big-screen TV, stacks of storybooks, colorful artwork and stuffed toys, Breana was often homesick. It wasn’t just because she missed her friends or wanted to avoid painful treatments: Breana hated being away from her black Labrador retriever, Midnight. “Breana would be clinging tight to Midnight because she didn’t want to go,” Tracy says.

In 2008, during a stressful trip to NIH that included flight delays and a missed shuttle, Breana burst into

tears and was inconsolable. Tracy shared a piece of news that cheered Breana up in an instant: There was a dog waiting to greet her at The Children’s Inn.

“The minute I told her about Vi, she instantly stopped crying, and the world was OK,” Tracy recalls. “She was already calling for Vi the minute we walked in the door.”

Vi is a yellow Labrador retriever who was trained as a guide dog for the blind. After five years of service with two different families, Vi received her pink slip because she was too distracted to be an effective service dog. But retirement wasn’t in the cards for Vi. In 2008 she took on a second career as the tail-wagging greeter and first-rate confidante at The Children’s Inn.

In other pet therapy programs, children are only allowed to visit with dogs for short periods at designated times. At The Children’s Inn, Vi is a full-time staff member. Her main role is to help comfort the patients.

“Our mission is to reduce stress and promote healing; while NIH is taking care of the children’s medical needs, we’re taking care of their heart, soul and spirit,” explains Jennie Lucca, director of facilities and resident services at The Children’s Inn. “We had

a visiting therapy dog, but being able to provide families with constant access to a highly trained dog that is social enough to interact with kids has been a blessing.

“Vi is an incredibly patient and kind dog that provides unconditional love to the children who are dealing with intense medical treatments,” she adds. “The feedback we’ve gotten since Vi has come to [The Children’s Inn] has been overwhelmingly positive, especially among children and families who’ve left dogs at home.”

Jennie is aware of research that shows the health benefits of interacting with a pet or companion animal — benefits ranging from decreased stress and increased healing to lowered blood pressure and improved mental outlook. But it’s the anecdotal evidence that convinces her that Vi is making a difference.

Recently, a little girl returned to The Children’s Inn complaining of a “mean nurse” who stuck her with several needles. The girl announced that she needed some time with Vi. Along with a volunteer, the pair went into a “reflection room” where the girl petted Vi and told the dog about her painful treatment. A few minutes later, the pair emerged from the room. Vi’s tail was wagging, and the little girl was skipping down the hall with the dog, the mean nurse and big needles forgotten.

Eden “Bubba” Durst doesn’t use Vi as a confidante but he does rely on her to take his mind off of the painful treatments he endures to treat a rare disease called chronic



*Emily Secrest, whose sister Madison is being treated at NIH, schmoozes with Vi.*

granulomatous. After receiving a bone marrow transplant and having parts of his lungs removed at NIH in March 2010, Bubba has spent many months living at The Children's Inn, making just a few visits to his home in rural Wisconsin. Although Bubba misses his dad and his five siblings, the hardest part about staying at The Children's Inn is being thousands of miles from his dog, a chocolate Labrador retriever named Dodge.

"Dodge is his best friend, and it's hard for him to leave [Dodge] at home," explains Bubba's mom, Bobbi Jo. "When we walked in and saw Vi sitting there, Bubba was immediately drawn to her. There's not a lot to look forward to when you're in the hospital all the time," she adds. "Vi gives him something to look forward to; it reminds him of home."

Bubba takes Vi for walks, sits beside her on the floor to pet her sleek blonde coat and sneaks her treats. He tells Vi stories about Dodge, and when he writes letters home, Bubba tells his siblings about his four-legged companion at The Children's Inn. "She doesn't make me feel better, but she does make me happy," Bubba says.

Vi is so successful in her role of caretaker that she has become a dog in demand at The Children's Inn and NIH. She has her own Google calendar to track her appointments, and volunteers are constantly updating it. "We have to make sure she's not double-booked," Jennie jokes.

In addition to serving as the official welcome pooch at The Children's Inn, Vi is a certified pet therapy dog and spends one morning a week in the pediatric unit of the hospital at NIH, where she works with doctors and patients to meet treatment goals. She might distract a boy with tricks or sloppy kisses during a painful procedure or convince a girl who's struggling with mobility to take her for a walk in the halls.

In the evenings, she's the star of Reading Aloud with Vi, a program that invites patients staying at The Children's Inn to practice their reading skills with a non-judgmental (and snuggly) audience. Vi also makes regular appearances in creative writing classes at The Children's Inn and is the main character in some wild and crazy stories that the patients write.

"Vi is so perfect for her role," says Jennie. "She's definitely an extrovert and gets her energy from being around the kids."

In fact, the staff and volunteers have noticed that Vi acts a little depressed when she has too much downtime. She prefers spending her time comforting children, and the moment she's needed — whether for a private cuddle or a game of fetch — Vi wags her tail and jumps into action. In the two years since she's been on staff at The



Children's Inn, she has helped to comfort more than 3,000 patients from around the world.

Vi helps to make Breana's continued stays at The Children's Inn much less stressful. For Breana, Vi has become a welcome distraction from the pain of treatment and the sadness of being away from home.

"There are no more teary goodbyes, and now Breana is excited to get to the Inn to see Vi," says Tracy.

Breana rushes to greet Vi the minute she checks into The Children's Inn, and Vi is the first one Breana turns to when she needs a good listener.

"Vi helps me out a lot. She makes me feel like it's going to be OK," Breana says. "Vi understands me in a special way. She's a great dog. She helps me by being there." 🐾

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*Jodi Helmer is a freelance writer in Charlotte, North Carolina. She shares her home with a registered therapy dog named Molly.*

#### **Does your pet have what it takes to be certified in therapy?**

*Therapy animals come in all breeds (and species), but generally have sound temperaments and a love of people. To learn more about how to get your pet tested and certified as a therapy animal, or to find out how to start a pet therapy program at your facility, contact any of these organizations:*

- **Delta Society**  
[www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org), (425) 679-5500
- **Therapy Dogs International**  
[www.tdi-dog.org](http://www.tdi-dog.org), (973) 252-9800
- **Love on a Leash**  
[www.loveonaleash.org](http://www.loveonaleash.org), (760) 740-2326
- **Intermountain Therapy Animals**  
[www.therapyanimals.org](http://www.therapyanimals.org), (801) 272-3439