



Spreading smiles

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY ALYSON CAMPBELL



Humans aren't the only ones working at Woodridge Rehabilitation and Nursing. Dogs like Autumn and Judson of Therapy Dogs of Vermont are trained to work too, though they offer a different type of healing.

While the dogs occasionally help out with physical therapy, their main focus is emotional healing.

"I think the biggest change that I see is it seems like the residents become more alive. You see them smiling, you see them happy, five minutes before the dog they could have been kind of sleepy, maybe nonresponsive and instantly, when the dogs come in, they wake up, they smile, they become engaged," said Woodridge Activities Director Ellen O'Hara.

Not only do the dogs simply bring smiles, but they offer a way to fill a void for those who may have had pets during their life.

"It helps them remember things in their past that might be really helpful to them and good feelings for them," explained Autumn's owner, Emily McLean.

There are plenty of people to socialize with throughout Woodridge, but a dog seems to bring a different connection that is out of the ordinary for the residents. They are able to pet them, give

treats, and talk to them in a way they wouldn't talk to a human.

"I think it's easy for people to connect with a dog because they don't feel judged, they don't feel like they have to be on their best behavior, they can be themselves," said McLean.

Woodridge Rehabilitation and Nursing has a calendar full of activities available for their residents, but the therapy dog visits are unique. That's because no matter what their abilities are, they are able to connect with a dog.

"There's that human-canine connection that is more powerful than we remotely give it credit for," explained Judson's owner, Brian Carten.

Along with visiting nursing homes such as Woodridge, Therapy Dogs of Vermont tries to fulfill all visit requests usually including schools, correction centers, or "any place where you think a person might need a smile," explained McLean. However, even with about 300 teams working in Vermont, New Hampshire, New York and Canada, they are still looking for more volunteers in order to fill all of their requests.

If you think you and your dog would make a good therapy dog team, visit www.therapydogs.org to get started.

