

Counseling Center offers new dog therapy program

by Allison Reineck - Thursday, March 03, 2011

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/9465/counseling-center-offers-new-dog-therapy-program/>

There is a new addition to the Counseling Center at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, and he's not your run-of-the-mill staffer.

He has four legs and goes by "Sherman."

He's the Center's new therapy dog. The Boxer joined the Counseling Center in fall 2010 to begin assisting individuals who have experienced trauma, anxiety, depression or life changing events. Sherman works twice each week with clients who are referred to him and his handler by other counselors.

How Sherman became part of UW Oshkosh

In 2007, Kim Charniak, clinical social worker at UW Oshkosh, was looking to make an addition to her family. She adopted dogs before but did not know what breed would get along with her family's Dalmatian.

"I wanted a pet that was friendly with other people and good with other dogs," Charniak said. "When I typed all of those characteristics into the computer, Boxer popped out. They are very patient and highly intelligent animals."

Sherman was given to Green Acres Boxer Rescue of Wisconsin, the only Boxer rescue in the state, because his previous owners thought he was going to be a breed dog, but that was not the case. When Charniak contacted Green Acres about adopting, Sherman was 18 months old and spent most of his life in a kennel.

"When I got him he hadn't been exposed to a lot of things—he didn't know what a treat was or what stairs were—but he learned quickly and he was just an outstanding dog," Charniak said. "At 18 months old, Sherman had to go to puppy training classes because he had not learned any obedience skills yet. He graduated fairly quickly and at the top of his class."

Sherman continued graduating levels of obedience training at a rapid pace. After these successful courses and having adjusted from living in a kennel to living in a house, Charniak knew Sherman was going to have a great life.

"Pretty soon the trainers and my vet kept saying, 'This is a therapy dog. You realize you have a therapy dog, right?' So we started training for the Good Canine Citizen Certification course," Charniak said. "At that same time, I started doing some research about therapy dogs and began finding really good results and thought an animal could really benefit the University."

After investing her time into animal therapy research and training courses, Charniak approached

Counseling Center Director Joe Abhold with a proposal to incorporate an animal assisted therapy program within the Center—Sherman being the therapy dog of course.

“Kim asked, and I thought it was a great idea,” said Joe Abhold, director of the UW Oshkosh Counseling Center. “We did a survey of how animals were being used to assist in therapy across the country and took the results and proposal to Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Petra Roter and Chancellor Wells.”

There are several higher education institutions across the country that incorporate pet therapy activities on campus, but according to Abhold, UW Oshkosh is the only university in the U.S. to have an animal assisted therapy program that is being integrated as part of the treatment process.

“There are many colleges that provide pet assisted activities or events, but counseling services at those institutions do not offer animal assisted therapy programs to their students and staff,” Abhold said. “I think there is something emotionally freeing about being in a calming presence of an animal. With Sherman, we are able to offer more relaxation and therapy services to students—creating a sense of safety and nurturance.”

When someone comes in for an appointment with Sherman and Charniak, he knows how to naturally respond and sense situations. Having Sherman present creates a relaxed environment for people, and in turn produces a more rapid therapy process because people feel comfortable.

“In session, Sherman might approach the student and put his head on the student’s lap,” Charniak said. “Even if the student is talking to me and not focusing on the dog at the moment, Sherman might lie at their feet and make himself available to that student.”

Just like faculty, staff and students, being a therapy dog comes with a lot of responsibilities. Sherman is required to have a bath, teeth brushed, ears cleaned and paws wiped before stepping into the Counseling Center twice per week. He also is required to continue his training and veterinary visits.

“He is required to maintain up-to-date vaccinations and checkups, know all of the obedience commands, remain calm when there are distractions, have a good temperament, respond to other animals appropriately, and maintain his certification,” Charniak said. “He is like everybody else; he has a work, home and social life.”

When Sherman is not at the Counseling Center, he is at home with his Boxer “brother” and family. Charniak explained that his personality does change, but Sherman continues to remain a friendly and loving animal.

“At home he’s a regular dog—barks sometimes when he is not supposed to—lies with my kids on the floor or plays with his other Boxer brother,” Charniak said. “Some of his favorite things are taking walks or rides in the car.”

Having a Sherman on staff is just one way the UW Oshkosh Counseling Center and its experts embrace different therapy approaches as well as all differences within the campus community. The services, including animal assisted therapy, are offered to all students, faculty and staff.

“Sherman is one way that the Counseling Center contributes to this University,” Abhold said. “He is a contributing member of this caring campus community.”

For more information about the Counseling Center, Sherman and therapy programs, visit http://www.uwosh.edu/couns_center/.

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