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Bright Spot News

The Annual Publication of Bright Spot Therapy Dogs, Inc.

2025

Proud to be an American Kennel Club recognized Therapy Dog Organization

The Undeniable Power of the Human-Canine Bond

Rewarding and Humbling Work by Steve Monkiewicz



Several years ago, at Bradley International Airport, I caught a glimpse of a golden retriever and a woman, both wearing blue vests in the baggage claim area. They were a Bright Spot Therapy Dog team. I asked if I could pet the golden, and then asked the woman about Bright Spot. As she told me about the work they do, I knew our golden retriever and I would become a Bright Spot team to bring comfort to travelers when I retired.

I knew my daughter, who was co-owner with the breeder of Merlot, a female golden, would also be interested in learning about Bright Spot. I texted her the information immediately. She and her husband soon became certified therapy dog teams with Merlot. I was planning on retiring in the next few years. Our golden, Ella, was still a youngish,

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MISSION STATEMENT
Bright Spot Therapy Dogs, Inc. is a registered 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to placing well-trained certified therapy dog teams in meaningful programs that provide comfort and caring through the human-canine bond. Our special volunteers serve in a wide variety of settings including hospitals, nursing homes, hospice, schools, libraries and other facilities where therapy dogs are needed.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS
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Bright Spot News is published annually.

Editor-in-Chief - Michelle Karb
Graphic Design - Nancy Fields
Production - Dan Berger

Bringing comfort to those who need it most.



Dear Friends,

Our 20th Anniversary year was a resounding success, thanks to the continuing support of our generous donors and the selfless dedication of our nearly 300 volunteers.

In June, Bright Spot Founder Cynthia Hinckley and National Dog Show Host and Founder of Angel on a Leash David Frei joined over 100 Bright Spot volunteers and friends to celebrate the first 20 years of the organization. Both Cynthia and David spoke with us about the im-

pact of a life dedicated to sharing their dogs with others, and inspired us to continue engaging in this important, meaningful, and necessary work.

We held 12 therapy dog training courses in 2024, and are scheduled to hold 13 in 2025. To assist our growing number of volunteers with finding appropriate locations to visit, signing up for group visiting events, and navigating the annual renewal process, we have added the position of Volunteer Liaison to our Board of Directors. Cathie Parsons, Bright Spot volunteer, trainer, and evaluator, has joined our Board of Directors to fill this exciting new role. We are thrilled to bring this layer of support to our volunteers and to welcome Cathie to our Board.

Kevin Russell, Board Chair and IT Director, has continued to improve our online application and course enrollment process and subsequent online certification requirements, creating a more intuitive user interface for prospective and current volunteers. Additionally, we are working to improve the annual renewal process for all volunteers, providing maximum flexibility and multiple means of communication to ensure diverse volunteer needs are acknowledged and embraced. Our volunteer retention rate in 2024 was nearly 88%, the highest it has ever been.

Bright Spot participated in more than 40 community outreach events in 2024, including the Western Massachusetts Down Syndrome Buddy Walk, Apex Orchards’ Donuts for Dogs in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, the Plainfield Historical Society Dog Show in Plainfield, Massachusetts, and 12 College Stress Relief Events. This is a record number of events building awareness about our organization and the work we do.

The power of the human-canine bond is undeniable. In this edition of *Bright Spot News*, we offer you a glimpse into the incredible work performed by our certified therapy dog teams. You will read how one volunteer turned the grief of losing her beloved black lab into welcoming a future Bright Spot into her life, how eight new volunteers are partnering with their dogs to provide comfort to others, and how an assistant superintendent of schools brings her Bright Spot to the Central Office to support adults who work in the district.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue. Perhaps you, too, have a wonderful dog you would like to share with others, or you would like to donate to our work. We would love to hear from you.

Warmest regards,

Michelle T. Karb

Michelle T. Karb
Executive Director

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Dory brings smiles to travelers at Bradley International Airport

seven-year-old at the time. I thought she would make a great therapy dog. Then COVID hit. My wife and I both decided to retire and everything essentially shut down. So, like a lot of families, we decided to add a new member to the family. On June 3, 2020, we welcomed Dory, a female from Merlot’s second litter. Dory was from the breeder’s “D” litter. Our oldest granddaughter is a huge fan of Finding Nemo and Finding Dory. Dory was an easy choice for the name.

On April 23, 2022, Ella passed away. To honor Ella, I decided Dory and I would attend the first Bright Spot Therapy Dog training class we could get into. Dory and I attended training in September of 2022. I felt we were doing well with all of the training and practice until the instructor, Katie O’Brien, explained that she would be placing food and treats around the training room. She asked us to walk around the room twice without our dog eating any of the food or treats. I looked at Dory and said, “Well, this is our Achilles Heel. We may as well leave now.” Dory is a highly food motivated dog and I was certain I’d never be able to train her not to react to food. Katie assured me we could train her to *leave it*. It took a lot of work, but with Katie’s help, we did it. We practiced diligently for a few weeks after training and passed our field evaluation in October 2022.

The first Bright Spot Therapy Dogs visit Dory and I attended was a college stress relief event at my alma mater, the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. There were twenty Bright Spot teams who were visited by several hundred students and staff. I was both excited to be able to give back in some small way for the great education I received, and nervous about how we would be received. Dory was very laid-back and composed. She recognized she was working with her Bright Spot vest on and was somewhere that wasn’t home. We both enjoyed every minute of the over two hours we spent at UMass.

We later joined the Veterans’ Home at Holyoke group that visits veterans two Saturdays each month, we visit several other western Massachusetts

In Memory of Special Pets

- Helen Clement
In memory of Lilly
 - Diane and Douglas Gnepp
In memory of Raven
 - Cathy Guglielmo
In memory of Beau
 - James and Heather Duggan
In memory of Murphy
 - Kristen and Mike Hinckley
In memory of BB
 - Peter and Anita Hinckley
In memory of BB, Buddy and PJ
 - Maggie Horsnell
In memory of Katie
 - Diane Houston
In memory of Finlay
 - Gail Judd
In memory of Molly
 - Michelle Karb
In memory of Ace
 - Michelle Karb
In memory of Jouie
 - Michelle Karb
In memory of Murphy
- Michelle Karb
In memory of Teddy
 - Michelle Karb
In memory of Thomas
 - Teresa Knox
In memory of Zango and Lali
 - Candice Lash
In memory of Woody
 - Jennifer Lewis
In memory of Ding
 - Patricia Lizotte
In memory of Jessie
 - Gail and Dave Moran
In memory of Murphy
 - Kathy Osborne
In memory of Dehli and Kaegli
 - Noella Plumb
In memory of the Plumb dogs
 - Ned Polan
In memory of Brinkley
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In memory of Mekko and Nikki
 - Nancy Ronan
In memory of Black Jack
 - Nancy Ronan
In memory of Chloe
 - Nancy Ronan
In memory of Murphy
 - Nancy Ronan
In memory of Sadie
 - Brian and Sheila Schick
In memory of Clementine
 - Lindsey Serafini
In memory of Cate
 - Shirley Stevens
In memory of Kirby
 - Becky Walton
In memory of Ace
 - Irene and Neil White
In memory of Obi

Donations reported here run from January 1, 2024 through December 31, 2024. All donations received after December 31, 2024 will be reported in the 2026 issue of Bright Spot News.

Why I Give
by Kerry Normandin



Michael (age 11) and Max

I first learned about Bright Spot Therapy Dogs, Inc. through meeting local volunteer Nancy Ronan and her beautiful dogs, Clementine and Comet, at a local fair. I invited them to speak at an educational class for the Goshen Council on Aging and I learned so much more! The variety of people who are visited by the volunteers and their dogs, and the positive ways these people are helped is amazing to me.

I give to Bright Spot in memory of my younger brother, Michael Frain. He died far too young in 2021 at the age of 51. Michael absolutely loved dogs! He considered himself a bit of a “dog whisperer” and dogs really did respond to him. Growing up we had a fox terrier named Max who was a bit of a rascal. Although Michael never did get another dog of his own after Max, he would often take his friends’ dogs for hikes and walks and hang-out sessions. Michael understood dogs and dogs understood Michael. He would be very happy to have donations made to Bright Spot Therapy Dogs in his memory. 🐾

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- Diane Houston
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- Shelly King
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- Pat Montimurro
In honor of The Karb Team
- Thomas Shea and Suzanne Strempek Shea
In honor of Teach

In Honor of Special Pets continued

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Dory provides comfort to students at Gateway Regional School

This fall we started visiting the Gateway Regional School and Littleville Elementary School where my granddaughter attends. Dory is greeted with big smiles everywhere we go in the schools. We visit reading programs, guidance offices, and special education and preschool programs. We also try to make time to visit the administration and healthcare offices. The sixth-grade class visits the library every Tuesday to take out books and meet Dory and sometimes read to her. Last week we were asked to join the sixth-grade class to help calm some nerves as the students read stories that they wrote in front of their peers. On the same day the assistant principal asked if Dory and I could also visit the eighth-grade class, hoping we could lower their anxiety while they were taking online tests. Everyone, including the teachers, appreciated the visit from Dory.

I never expected the work that Dory and I do would be this rewarding and humbling at the same time. Sometimes our encounters are very brief; the only words spoken are, "Thank you," or, "You don't know how much I needed this." Other conversations last much longer. Sometimes people will share why they stopped to visit Dory. It may be a difficult time they are going through, the loss of a loved one or a dear pet. Sometimes they are stressed about traveling. They all touch your heart in some way. On one occasion, a gentleman asked me who was receiving the therapy. I said, "I think we all are: you, me, and Dory." 🐾



Dory provides comfort to students at Littleville Elementary School

No More Dogs!
by Irene White

I believe some things happen for a reason. My therapy dog, Bailey, is one of those things.

We lost our black lab, Obi, four days into our vacation to Florida in 2023 at thirteen-and-a-half years old. At that time, we said the famous, "No more dogs!" Those words stood until my husband called me to the computer, "...just to look at something." It was a beautiful black lab sitting in a tub of water at a foster home in Texas. He was so handsome, and we knew we had to get him. Long story short, American Lab Rescue worked with us to get us approved to adopt him. They were unable to find a foster in the New England area, so his foster at the time agreed to keep him until we got home to Massachusetts nine weeks later.

The moment I saw him, I was sobbing because he looked so much like Obi. The first thing Bailey did was gently put his paws on my chest and lick my tears as if to say, "It's alright." I knew at that moment Bailey was special. He settled into our routine quickly and was a very good dog and quick learner. When my neighbor, Michelle Karb, met him, she said she thought he would make a wonderful therapy dog because of his calm demeanor. The seed was planted!

I enrolled him in Bright Spot training classes and he did well except for the "leave it" part of class. He thought all the treats on the floor were for him, and he vacuumed up every last one! He was supposed to leave them alone. Needless to say, we did lots of extra training on that command, and he and I passed the course and our evaluation.

I started taking him to Brookhaven Assisted Care in West Brookfield, Massachusetts, and both he and I loved going there immediately. Some residents were hesitant to have him near them at first, but that changed when they saw how gentle he was with other residents. He would sit to be petted and of course receive some treats from them. Then he would "shake" and look for another treat. I would chat with a resident, and Bailey would calmly lay at their feet. Some residents who were in bed would quickly sit up so they could give him his treats.

I love talking to the residents and hearing their stories. Many of them enjoy telling me of their previous dogs and how similar or different they were from Bailey. I love the smiles he gets when they know Bailey is "in the house"! His calm and relaxed demeanor is appreciated by all. The smiles he receives make me smile, too. I believe for the time he is with them, the



Irene and Bailey meet a new friend

No More Dogs! continued on page 8

Spotlight on New Teams



Cindy Mahoney and Willow

When my mother lived in an assisted living facility, her golden retriever, Ginger, was the belle of the ball while visiting there. Our dog, Willow, arrived from Dakin Humane Society with a desire to meet and be with people. Remembering the joy Ginger brought to others, we decided to try therapy dog work with Willow. We have enjoyed visiting as a Bright Spot Therapy Dog team at the UMass Stress Relief Events and the Veterans' Fair in Easthampton. Once a month, I bring Willow to pick up my daughter from her school program. Willow is always a big hit with students and staff, and she clearly relishes all the attention.



Abigail Vanasse and Louie

Louie is a two-and-a-half-year-old cockapoo. Louie began visiting my elderly mother at home, in rehab and in hospice when he was a puppy. He provided much joy for her in her last two years. While teaching him to behave and be respectful to an elderly person, I thought we could continue this work by becoming a Bright Spot Therapy Dog Team. We began our Bright Spot journey in the Fall of 2024 and now visit Riverside Industries, a facility that empowers people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, weekly. The clients, Louie, and I enjoy our weekly visits. Louie loves to go camping with us in the warm weather, and he also loves to spend time with our five grandchildren.



Phyllis Norris and Max

to college students. At Christmas, we went with my church to a nursing home and the residents fell in love with him. I contacted the activity director at that facility and we went back for another visit. He brought joy and smiles to all the residents we saw and I am working to set up a regular visiting schedule. My idea from many years ago to engage in this type of work has come to fruition. I am excited, happy, and so proud that Max and I are part of Bright Spot Therapy Dogs.

Several years ago, after visiting a family member at a nursing home, I left thinking it would be nice to bring a dog in to share love and comfort with the residents. Years later, I met someone who was very involved with Bright Spot Therapy Dogs and it was suggested to me that I enroll Max into one of the classes. Max is not a very social dog and I was hesitant that he would not make a good therapy dog. He went through the class and did excellent. We attended several College Stress Relief Events recently and Max did very well, providing comfort

Bari is an Italian water dog (Lagotto Romagnolo). The breed loves people (more than other dogs) and is very social. Before we became a Bright Spot Therapy Dog team, we would visit my elderly father who was in a memory unit and I watched Bari interact with residents. He was a natural at interacting with people, even encouraging some to talk about dogs they had in their lives. The nurses who worked in my father's unit suggested that I get Bari certified as a therapy dog. I am also recently retired, which gives me time to take him to visit facilities. We have been attending College Stress Relief Events, and we plan to visit an elementary school in



Jennifer Welborn and Bari

Granby, Connecticut on a regular basis so that Bari can be a reading pal with early readers there. Bari also enjoys scent/nose work, agility, and dock diving. Lagottos are hypoallergenic and used as truffle dogs in Italy and the Pacific Northwest. The breed is extremely versatile, very intelligent, and loves to please people. They are fairly uncommon in the U.S. because they were nearly extinct in Italy in the 1970s, and they were only recognized by the AKC in 2015. They are often placed with young children on the autism spectrum because of their gentle and pro-social nature.

Thank You to Our Donors

2024 Annual Report of Giving

We extend our deepest appreciation to our donors, foundations, and sponsors. Your generous support enables us to continue providing comfort and caring to people of all ages through visits from our highly trained therapy dog teams. From all of us at Bright Spot Therapy Dogs, Thank You! Your gift has made a difference in the lives of many.

Leadership Plus Donors (Gifts of \$2,500+)

- Diane Gould
In memory of Trevor

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- Kerry Normandin
In memory of Michael J. Frain
- Tonya and Richard Plumb
In memory of Lili

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- Western New England University
- Rebecca Wong and Dave Nitka

Juneau - An Important Presence at Central Office

by Stefanie Reinhorn

As an assistant superintendent in a system with ten schools and many therapy dogs in the schools, I knew the power of the canine-human bond. On many occasions, I had seen students stopping by the main office to visit the therapy dog in one school, peeking into the library at another for a chance to pet the therapy dog, and hurrying to their classroom where the therapy dog awaited in yet another school. Over the years, I have been so impressed with the impact of therapy dogs for students in our schools. What I didn't anticipate was how much the dogs matter to the adults in the schools as well.

Juneau is a six-year-old goldendoodle who loves people and seeks any chance to socialize. In 2024, Juneau and I were trained and certified by Bright Spot Therapy Dogs. As a district leader, my home base is in the Central Office where students rarely visit so I wasn't sure what Juneau's impact would be. Juneau comes to work with me one to two times per week and the positive impact is undeniable. When Juneau is at work, the adults in the office are visibly and positively impacted by his presence. People come out of their offices and gather to greet him, a brief break that not only fosters the human-canine connection but also brings people together with each other. At other times, Juneau makes the rounds visiting people at their desks and in their offices, sharing a moment with them individually. When visitors come to the Central Office for a meeting, they are



Juneau and a student pose for a photo

often surprised and excited to greet Juneau. During these interactions, I often learn more about them as people and possibly as pet owners than I might have without Juneau's presence.

When Juneau walks with me through the halls of the school where the Central Office is co-located, there are a few teachers who I have learned keep an eye out for him, asking for a few minutes of time with him to brighten their day. Not only does this seem to lift their spirits in the middle of what might be a stressful work day, but also it has allowed me to get to know these teachers in a way that I might not have as a district leader. On some occasions, Juneau accompanies me to other schools for meetings with teachers and he provides a gentle greeting to each participant who is interested. In these contexts, he offers a subtle ice-breaker before the meeting begins, inspiring connections among the adults. His occasional interactions with students are always a treat, possibly as much for Juneau as the students.

If I have a busy week when Juneau cannot come with me to work, multiple colleagues approach me asking when he will be in next and reminding me how important his presence is to the Central Office. At home, Juneau often follows me to the car, gently asking if he can accompany me to work, showing me how important his job is to him. On his work days, he comes home tired but then eagerly awaits the next visit to work. 🐾



Juneau connects with Central Office Staff

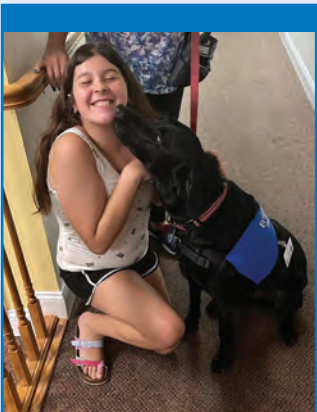
No More Dogs! continued from page 3

residents forget where they are and enjoy having a dog to remind them of happy times from their past.

As a retired teacher, I believe Bailey could be helpful in some classrooms. We visited a third grade class in Talmadge Elementary School in Springfield, Massachusetts, where he was very well-received by the students. I am hoping to set up a schedule for us to visit classrooms and pro-

grams where staff feel he could benefit students. Bailey gets so excited when I ask him if he wants "to go visiting" that he runs right for his Bright Spot vest.

I want to take advantage of his enthusiasm as long as he shows it. It is a wonderful experience for both of us, and I highly recommend visiting places where dogs can brighten people's days. It is very rewarding. 🐾



Bailey provides comfort



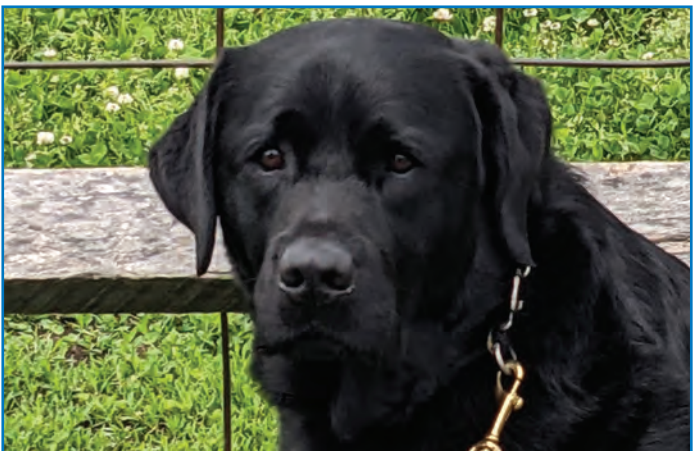
Jessica Burke and Kati

Meet Kati, the incredible five-year-old black lab who brings joy and comfort to elderly individuals in their communities. Kati has a special way of connecting with everyone she meets, offering a calm presence and a wagging tail that lights up any room. Whether visiting nursing homes or one-on-one with residents, Kati's friendly nature and loving demeanor make a big impact. Kati and I both share a deep love for these visits, cherishing the smiles and companionship we bring to others. At home, Kati is surrounded by her two playful puppy cousins - Otis, the spirited chocolate lab, and Bailey, the gentle pitbull. When not doing visits with others or playing with her puppy cousins, Kati can be found anywhere there is water where she can swim and play!



Donna Utakis and Mini

Mini came into my life during the summer of 2020 as a rescue driven up from Alabama. She was about a year old and the most cuddly dog I've ever had. Since we live very close to both UMass and Amherst College, we spend lots of time walking around campus, and from her very first walk there, Mini would gleefully run up to any and every college student she saw. The joy that she was bringing to them with these small encounters was so evident that I realized it was her calling to become a therapy dog with a focus on students. Since becoming certified, Mini has attended all of the Stress Relief Events at UMass and Hampshire College. She was also invited to be a therapy dog for the Stonewall Center at UMass so she has a biweekly gig there. She is genuinely sad on her "off" weeks!



Jeanne Moriarty and Tucker

My very friendly, quiet four-year-old lab, Tucker, was a successful AKC competition dog who had completed 10 AKC performance titles. Unfortunately, he was diagnosed with a medical issue that prohibited him from jumping. We needed to find a new avenue for Tucker to enjoy. Luckily, we met a wonderful Bright Spot Therapy Dog team at dog school who encouraged me to look into the Bright Spot Therapy Dogs program. Since completing his evaluation in June, Tucker has participated in Reading Buddies, College Stress Relief Events, and has become an AKC therapy dog. He still enjoys hiking in the woods and swimming. Tucker's tail wags energetically as he enters all our visiting sites, so I know he doesn't miss the competition ring at all.



Christina Shepley and Dill

Dill is a Staffordshire Bull Terrier. Dill and I decided to embark in therapy dog work because he would always gravitate to people who seemed to need an extra smile. This all started when I was working at an urgent care center during Covid and he would sit with children getting vaccines, providing comfort and support to those who were anxious and those who simply needed some comfort. When we are not visiting nursing homes, Dill enjoys showing in AKC conformation and being an ambassador to the breed.

Community Outreach Highlights from 2024



Bark in the Park - Worcester Red Sox



Apex Orchards Donuts for Dogs



TJO's Pets Rock



Down Syndrome Buddy Walk



Worcester Volunteer Fair



Pet Rock Festival



Bridgewater Public Library



Chesterfield 4th of July Parade



Western New England University Stress Relief



New England League of Middle Schools Annual Conference



Westhampton Public Library Read-In



Plainfield Historical Society Dog Show



Doozy Doo Parade



Jack Rome Memorial 5K



Westhampton Community Campfire



Vantage Health and Rehab of Wilbraham



Easthampton Summer Vet Fest



Southwick Public Library