

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2000

FINE FURRY FRIEND



STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW P. D'AGOSTINO

Rocky gets some attention and soft place to sit Saturday from Tom Wyatt at the New Orleans Home and Rehabilitation Center.

Pets and volunteers brighten lives

By **Valerie Faclane**
Staff writer

"Bringing love and leaving smiles" is the motto of the Visiting Pet Program, a non-profit organization of pet/handler teams who have completed training and certifica-

tion to provide animal-assisted activities to hospitals, nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities throughout the New Orleans area.

The visits of dogs, cats, guinea pigs and rabbits and their handlers help to enhance the quality of patients' lives

through the human-animal bond.

"All they have to do is walk in. Just their presence makes the difference," said Lee Gaffney, president of the board of the 13-year-old program. "Everyone knows that their love is unconditional."

Just ask Alison Cook, who has been a volunteer with the program for the past eight years.

"I got involved because I had a big dog who loved children and I didn't have any

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Handlers, pets must complete training

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children," Cook said.

Atticus, a big Rhodesian ridgeback who is now deceased, enjoyed visiting Ochsner's children's ward, Cook said.

These days Cook is accompanied by Beatrice, a 7-year-old greyhound.

"She loves it. She is a very needy dog and she needs a lot of attention, so this way she doesn't have to share the attention at my house with the other dogs and cats," Cook said. "She can get all the attention to herself from all the residents at the nursing homes."

Cook and Beatrice go out about five times a month. They visit the New Orleans Home and Rehabilitation Center, Bethany Nursing Home and the Ronald McDonald House. They also visit the Algiers Library to participate in the program's "Reading to Rover" program, developed to help improve the skills of children who have difficulty reading aloud.

On Sept. 13 the Visiting Pet



STAFF PHOTO BY MATTHEW P. D'AGOSTINO

Eddie Guidroz is pulled through the halls of the New Orleans Home and Rehabilitation Center on Saturday by sleigh and wheelchair dog, Meghan. The dog is one of several other pets, including dogs, cats and one guinea pig, from the Visiting Pets Program visiting the center.

Program will conduct a new volunteer orientation program — for people only — in which those who think they might be interested in participating in pet therapy visits can learn more about the program.

The orientation, which is free, will be at 7 p.m. in the Audubon Zoo Auditorium at 6500 Magazine St.

Pet/handler evaluations with animals will be conducted at a later date, Gaffney said.

The evaluation is set in an environment that resembles a nursing home with a lot of noise and medical equipment, she said. A veterinarian, an obedience trainer and an evaluation team determine if an animal is appropriate for the program.

"We look for calm temperament, well-behaved, good-mannered pets and pets that are calm around other pets and lots of people and not bothered by medical equipment and the sights and sounds of a medical facility," Gaffney said.

Once approved, pets and handlers enter a training period during which they pair up with a buddy (a trained volunteer) and make visits to various facilities to learn the ropes.

"We require one visit a month, so it takes about four months," Gaffney said.

Gaffney said there is a \$30-per-year membership fee for volunteers.

For more information, call program coordinator Joyce Kleinfeldt at 866-2532.