



Everything New Orleans

## Furry visitors lap up attention at Uptown New Orleans nursing home

Published: Thursday, December 08, 2011, 10:46 AM Updated: Thursday, December 08, 2011, 10:47 AM



By **Annette Sisco, The Times-Picayune**

Olive Oyl loves a party. The medium-sized rescue dog with a shiny black coat was having the time of her life recently at the John Hainkel Jr. Home and Rehabilitation Center on Henry Clay Avenue, meeting and greeting residents as part of the Visiting Pet Program.



[View full size](#)

Chris Granger / The Times-Picayune

Pat Egers, left, introduces Maggie to Elaine Weis, while Tom Gaffney, right, introduces Tallulah to Denise Dewiche during a Visiting Pet tour to John Hainkel Home on Henry Clay Avenue in New Orleans.

"My son was in Touro for a month," said Olive Oyl's owner, Mike Azzarello, tagging along behind Olive as she walked up to residents in wheelchairs, wagging her tail madly. "My wife said, you and Olive ought to do this."

On a recent Saturday morning, handlers in pine-green shirts and official-looking badges fanned out through the halls of John Hainkel, leashed dogs trotting along beside them. Resident Elaine Weis leaned over in her wheelchair to get a smooch from Maggie, a freckled blond Sharpei mix. "Aww, thank you," Weis said.

Owner Patricia Egers said Maggie, who is about 3 years old, was found on the street, starving and pregnant. "You can see she's not starving now," Egers joked as the dog waddled over to another resident. Despite her rough beginnings, Maggie is a people-lover with lots of personality. "She loves to be loved," Egers beamed.

Egers also encountered the Visiting Pet program when relatives were hospitalized. "My mother and my sister both had visits when they were in East Jefferson and in Touro," she said. "It meant a lot. It was a little touch of home."

The Visiting Pet Program began in 1987 as a small animal-assisted therapy program. Now it's an all-volunteer nonprofit corporation with about 100 volunteers who visit 20 area hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and retirement homes. Owners and pets must attend training, pass a health

and personality evaluation, go through a four-visit probation period and commit to at least one visit a month. And there are mock visits to make sure the dogs, as well as cats, rabbits and guinea pigs, can handle a health-care environment.

Most important, visiting pets must have a sweet, affectionate and calm nature.

"The ones who make it through aren't bothered by TV noise, wheelchairs -- or the bingo machine," said Tom Gaffney, who's been with the program for 11 years, lately escorting Tallulah, a border collie mix.

Helen Schneidau reaches into a cat carrier and carefully extracts Oscar, a floppy 15-year-old yellow tabby. "He's been doing this about 12 years," Schneidau said. Oscar's qualifications: a silky coat and the world's mellowest personality.

"I think cats have to be pretty laid-back to do this," Schneidau acknowledged.

Resident Katie Lowry welcomed the chance to cuddle Oscar. Visits from pets make her stint at the rehab center go a little more easily, she said. "I have cats," she said. "And I have one that looks like him at home."

Administrative director Robert Rodrigue said residents look forward to the animal encounters. "Animals are unconditional love," he said. "I think it gives the residents a whole level of normalcy and affection" that only pets can provide.

"So many of the people here had pets as children," Lowry said. "It brings back that happy time. We're all suckers for animals."

For more information about the Visiting Pets Program and upcoming training sessions, go to [www.visitingpetprogram.org](http://www.visitingpetprogram.org).

â€¢â€¢â€¢â€¢â€¢â€¢â€¢â€¢â€¢

Annette Sisco is community news editor. She can be reached at [asisco@timespicayune.com](mailto:asisco@timespicayune.com) or 504.826.3310.

© 2011 NOLA.com. All rights reserved.