



SUMMER 2014

FIRST CHOICE

FARM CREDIT OF EAST CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

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SAM HILL *Kennels*

Health and wellness might start with achieving appropriate vital levels. Mental and emotional wellness are more difficult to measure but are arguably equally important.

Farm Credit of East Central Oklahoma member Sharon Wilson is promoting wellness one doggy visit at a time.

Though recipients of her animal assisted therapy are the intended beneficiaries, Sharon reaps immeasurable rewards as well.

"Immeasurable" is probably a word that would make a numbers gal like Sharon roll her eyes. A retired University of Tulsa Mathematics and Computer Science professor, Sharon is a Tulsa native who says she received her Master of Science in Mathematics in the days when there were only one or two females in the program. Sharon still teaches in Broken Arrow three days a week at

math learning center, Mathnasium.

In 2000, Sharon retired from TU and moved to 75 wooded acres she owned near Claremore. With help from Benny Kellner at the Broken Arrow office, she purchased an adjacent 25 acres. Sharon built a carriage house in the only cleared spot on the property, accessed by a winding gravel drive off a paved county road. A dog lover since she was young and involved with animal assisted therapy for 20 years, the property allows Sharon space to raise, train and house therapy dogs.

Her secluded home is the perfect spot for her pack of five Samoyed dogs and herd of eight rescued goats – who are quickly multiplying (Sharon is looking for good homes for the young kids after weaning, if anyone is interested!). Sharon combined her father's exclamation "Where in the Sam Hill are those kids?" with an abbreviation of her favorite dog breed, Samoyeds, to dub the property Sam Hill Kennels.

About the dogs

Sharon said she saw her first Samoyed in 1965 and fell in love with it for the completely wrong reason - its



appearance. The breed is characterized by thick, long white hair, black lips that curl into a signature Samoyed smile and a bright, alert personality. Any breed or mix breed can be used for therapy; Sharon happens to be partial to Samoyeds.

She evaluates each of her dogs for their temperament, manner of walking on a leash, and acceptance to being touched on their ears, tails and legs before they become therapy dogs.

Only one of her Samoyeds is too boisterous to be a therapy dog. Her most responsive therapy dog, Murphy, was rescued from an animal hoarder.

Because of the dogs' heavy, weather resistant coat, Sharon houses her dogs inside where the air conditioner and fans can combat the heat of Oklahoma summers. Because she takes the dogs into human medical care centers, she keeps an aggressive grooming schedule,

keeping in mind that the dogs cannot have any chemicals like flea killer applied to their hair 24 hours prior to a therapy visit. A concrete and tile grooming area in the entry level of her home allow her to perform most of the grooming herself.



Sharon competes in American Kennel Club shows as a way to promote awareness of the Samoyed breed, to encourage responsible breeding practices, and to educate people about the benefits

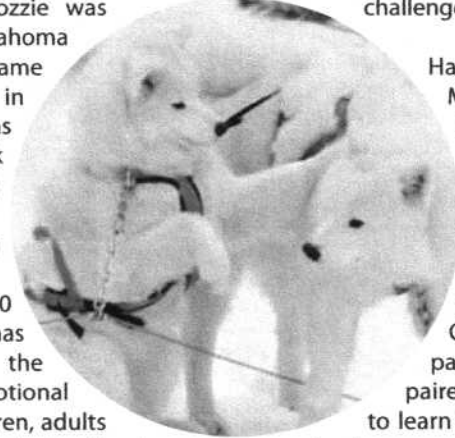
of animal assisted activities. Five of her Samoyeds have obtained AKC Champion status. One of those champions, Bozzie was inducted into the Oklahoma Animal Hall of Fame Companion category in 2010. Bozzie was nominated for his work as a therapy dog with the R.E.A.D program.

Animal assisted activities

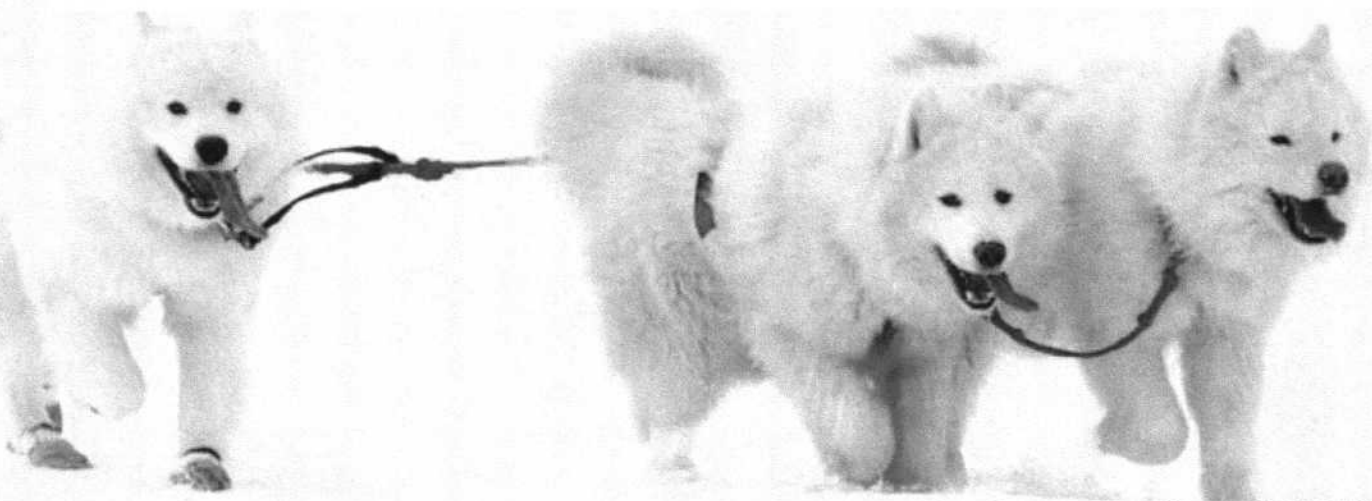
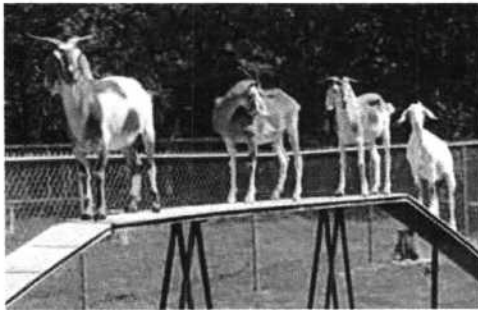
For about 20 years, Sharon has helped improve the mental and emotional wellness of children, adults and elderly by volunteering her time and dogs in schools, hospitals, libraries and any other facility where interaction with dogs would

benefit people. A dog and handler pair is referred to as a team. Sharon said when she began volunteering, hospitals didn't allow therapy dogs but the culture is changing. During a typical visit, people are invited to pet the dog, walk alongside it, or simply look at it. Others want to brush the dog or throw toys if the dog will fetch. Sharon said some therapy dogs perform simple tricks or obedience routines to entertain onlookers, but her dogs mostly are petted and brushed.

Her team visits 2-3 facilities a month, which are coordinated through several affiliates including Karing K-9's, Champs Foundation and the R.E.A.D program. Karing K-9's volunteers visit about 30 treatment centers in the Tulsa area. In April, her team visited Tulsa patients at St. John Hospital, Oasis Adult Day Care, and The Center Tulsa, which helps individuals with physical challenges.



Coaches Handlers And Many Paws Foundation is a program for young adults and adults who have intellectual disabilities. Champs participants are paired with a team to learn to teach a dog simple commands. Partnering with a handler and therapy dog allows students to have fun learning communication skills, social interaction



and cognitive thinking. Champs students improve self-esteem, problem-solving skills and awareness of body space.

A fairly new activity for therapy dogs is the Reading Education Assistance Dogs program. R.E.A.D was created in 1999 to improve children's literacy and communication skills by allowing children to read to therapy animals. The non-judgmental listeners put children at ease and help them improve confidence at reading aloud.

According to Sharry Buhanan-Decker, the national and international R.E.A.D coordinator, Sharon is one of only nine active R.E.A.D teams in Oklahoma. "According to our records, she has been volunteering in different facilities since 2006! We don't have a R.E.A.D. affiliate in the state (a group of R.E.A.D. teams working together to organize volunteer facilities), so our Oklahoma teams work independently, or through other community groups, to organize their R.E.A.D. visits."

Technical side of volunteering

When you add a furry volunteer to the scene, it becomes more complicated than just showing up. Sharon is registered with Therapy Dogs Inc. which provides her with a \$5 million insurance policy that protects her from claims of injury, illness or property damage resulting from a visit with her therapy dogs. For the policy to be valid, she must follow all TDInc guidelines including



making at least one visit every three months and taking her dogs to an annual vet exam. Sharon said only volunteers are eligible for the coverage and have to display the Therapy Dogs Inc tag when visiting a facility.

Because of her extensive experience working with therapy dogs, Sharon is a tester/observer for TDInc. She observes a dogs' body language and questions the handler to determine if the team qualifies to be registered.

Service vs therapy dogs

Service dogs and therapy dogs are two very different distinctions Sharon explains. Service dogs are trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities. They are permitted to enter public buildings like restaurants and retail stores by the Americans With Disabilities Act. The ADA specifies that dogs whose sole function is to provide comfort or emotional support do not qualify as service animals.



Therapy dogs like Sharon's are accustomed to being petted and loved on; service dogs are professionals that should be left alone unless given permission by the dog's owner.

Sharon trained one golden retriever for TheraPetics Service Dogs of Oklahoma that went to a recipient in Jenks. She hated giving him up at the end of his 2-year training and doesn't plan to train another service dog but felt it was gratifying to provide a means for some independence to the recipient.

Animal community

Aside from the rewards of volunteering, Sharon has benefited from her dog ownership in other ways. She has formed lasting friendships with many other volunteers and animal lovers through the clubs, dog shows and facilities she's been involved with. One such friendship is Heather Owen and staff at Animal Acupuncture LLC in Tulsa, where she has taken several of her dogs for physical therapy and acupuncture. Now Sharon volunteers at Animal Acupuncture a couple times a week answering the phone, greeting customers and assigning patients to treatment rooms.

Even vacation has become doggy-oriented. For three years, Sharon and two of her Samoyeds participated in the Prairie Isle Dog Trekking Womens' Challenge in North Dakota. She learned to harness a dog and guide a small sled before the race. What may have started with a desire to help others has also turned into an avenue for personal wellness. ♦

Learn More

Therapetics Service Dogs of Oklahoma <http://therapetics.org/>

Karing K-9's Therapy Dogs www.facebook.com/KaringK9s

Champs – Coaches, Handlers And Many Paws www.champsfoundation.org

R.E.A.D. Program www.therapyanimals.org
www.facebook.com/ReadingEducationAssistanceDogs

Therapy Dogs Inc www.therapydogs.com

Prairie Isle Dog Trekking www.prairieisledogtrekking.com