

Daddy's Really Not Coming Home Anymore?

Therapy-Certified Goldens and Their Handlers Figured Prominently Among The Heroic Volunteers of September 11

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Left: Prior to gaining entry to the Pier 94 Family Assistance Center, Mario and Karen Canzoneri spent their days in Manhattan, offering their dogs wherever needed. This photo and the one below were taken in Union Square Park, which became an unofficial gathering place for survivors and other grieving New Yorkers. Karen with (from left) Jessie and Jake. Photo courtesy of Mario & Karen Canzoneri

Below top: Mario with Jake and Jessie at Union Square. Photo courtesy of Mario & Karen Canzoneri

Below top: Dave and Helen Anger with Hagar and Gus and unidentified Red Cross volunteer at right. This photo was taken at Liberty State Park in New Jersey, with the WTC site in lower Manhattan just across the Hudson River. Photo courtesy of Helen & Dave Anger



At the Family Assistance Center in Liberty State Park, New Jersey, in sight of lower Manhattan:

The Red Cross worker escorted Dave and Helen Sanger with their Golden Retrievers, "Hagar" and "Gus," to meet a young boy and his mother. The delighted child dropped to the floor to get closer to the dogs. He frolicked with them while his mother spoke with relief and social workers. Several minutes of hugging, petting and nuzzling had transpired when the boy suddenly turned and inquired of his mother, "So Daddy's really not coming home any more?" The Sangers were stunned speechless. Counselors later explained they had witnessed an important step in the youngster's grieving process, the first outward acknowledgment of his father's death at the World Trade Center.

As we reflect on September, 2001, most of us remember seeking the comforting touch of our own Golden(s) as the horrors of terrorism unfolded on our television screens. A select group of our Golden-owning peers, though, were driven to do more. They responded by going to work among the victims' survivors, sharing the healing power of their dogs. It's called "crisis therapy," a term previously unfamiliar to most of us. No one had ever conceived a need of such magnitude for this little known sub-discipline of animal assisted therapy. And few, if any, had been trained for it. Nevertheless, with that spirit of patriotism and volunteerism that became the hallmark of September 11, they delivered. From all accounts, they and their Golden Retrievers made three remarkable achievements. First, they gained entry – which in itself was no mean accomplishment. Then they stepped up to the grisly face of death and destruction, sharing and absorbing the pain of hundreds, if not thousands, of fellow Americans in need. Finally, they helped refine this specialized protocol and established beyond question the merit of including therapy dogs in disaster response planning.

Three assistance centers were established to serve victims' survivors last September. One was in suburban Virginia, near the Pentagon. Two were in the New York City vicinity, one at Pier 94 in Manhattan and the other just across the Hudson River at Liberty State Park in New Jersey. The purpose was to congregate





Left: Cub Scouts honored Karen Coulter and Tiffany for their work at Pier 94. She and husband Doug test and certify new therapy teams every year at Goldstock. Photo courtesy of Karen & Doug Coulter

Below top and bottom: Jessie and Jake on the job at the Family Assistance Center, Pier 94. Approximately 5,000 people visited each of its 100 days of operation. Ultimately some 300 therapy dogs - certified by Delta Society, Thera-Pet, Bright & Beautiful, Therapy Dogs International or other organizations - worked here. Some visited once while others worked dozens of days. All were scheduled and supervised by New York's ASPCA. Photos courtesy of Mario & Karen Canzoneri

all providers so survivors could apply for anything they might require at a single location.

The Pier 94 assistance center was a small city. Operating from early morning until midnight, an average of 5,000 visitors came each day for every imaginable type of assistance: financial, legal, medical, social and spiritual. Access was restricted and security measures extreme. The facility was staffed and ringed by police and military units. The Red Cross, Salvation Army and FEMA numbered among the 60 agencies present and catering to the needs of victims' families.

Knock, Knock. May We Come In?

But therapy organizations were *not* on the list of planned services at any of the centers. Volunteers and organizations literally had to lobby their way in. This proved to be most difficult at Pier 94, largest of the three. It was only through the hard-nosed determination of Staten Islander Mario Canzoneri and his wife, Karen, that the doors finally opened to therapy dogs. Stalking the exterior barricades for several days, they befriended dozens of police and soldiers. While pleased for the opportunity to stop and pet the Canzoneri's Golden retrievers, "Jake" and "Jessie," the workers explained they had no authority to grant admission. Mario and Karen's luck turned when the facility director arrived to see them standing in a cold drizzle. After listening briefly to their pleas and seeing the dogs' therapy credentials, the director ordered them admitted - just for the day - to "see how they do." Inside, they were instantly mobbed with attention, and by day's end had secured invitations for themselves and other therapy volunteers to return.

Stephanie LaFarge of New York's ASPCA, a psychologist by profession (and to whom the task of coordinating some 300 therapy teams at Pier 94 ultimately fell) spoke with praise and understanding about Canzoneri.

"People need a job in a crisis. Mario's feeling of helplessness was acute and not uncommon," LaFarge said. "He told me, 'The only way I can fight is with my dogs; they're my only weapon.' That's what drove him there; he was compelled. A lot of other people waited at home. Mario got in, precisely because he would not go away. And (once admitted) Mario, Karen, Jake and Jesse created the appetite for the use of (therapy) dogs."



Going To Work

Now that they were allowed to work, therapy handlers began encountering the special circumstances and challenges of crisis therapy. Being with so many terror-stricken and grieving people, sometimes for lengthy shifts, made for extreme stress levels. Some found they just could not cope.

"The World Trade Center event revealed that, even though our training, testing and evaluation process ensures that the handler and animal team will perform appropriately when visiting in various institutional settings, it does not adequately prepare or evaluate a team for disaster relief work," Delta Society vice president Lynette Spanola said.

"Some teams who came to help at the WTC simply could not handle the assignment. Handlers broke down in front of families with whom they were working. Some simply walked away and sat on the sidelines."

Handlers quickly discovered a large, new key group of clients besides survivors - other relief workers. June Golden, president of the Bright & Beautiful therapy group, recalls, "Many of the workers were living in temporary quarters and had been away from home for an extended period of time, adding to the stress of their situation. They were lonely and missed their families and their own dogs, too."

Brian Thompson, Assistant Director of the Pier 94 family center, and who lived there much of the time it operated, agrees wholeheartedly. "I have a Golden and being separated from him was tough. Those (therapy) dogs were a tremendous resource." Karen Coulter, who visited Pier 94 with her Golden, "Tiffany," remembers, "As we walked to the entrance, we were stopped by police officers, firefighters and soldiers who wanted to pet and hug Tiffany and 'Roxie' (a friend's Golden)." Jackie Morasco served in Washington with her Golden, "Ally," and recalls, "Military counselors would come over after speaking with their last assigned family just to love on the dogs, and many times said they wouldn't make it through the day had it not been for them. I remember a general or admiral coming in saying, 'I need a doggie hug.'"

Another key distinction in working in the crisis environment was the very nature of the therapy contacts. For most who are accustomed to visiting nursing homes and similar institutions, a principal measure of success is in simply winning a smile. One day at the center, the ASPCA's LaFarge told an Associated Press reporter, "You wouldn't expect to see dogs in a place where you come to get death certificates, but it gives people the feeling it can't be all that bad if there are dogs here." Subsequently she told *GRNews*, "The dogs were a catalyst for feelings. Many people I came into contact with just needed a dog to help them cry. Crisis therapy is about using the dogs for whatever set of feelings a person needs to access: fear, terror, anger, grief, whatever."

Two hundred miles from Manhattan at the Pentagon's assistance center, Ellen Chaffin and her Golden, "Jonah," experienced this many times. One particularly memorable encounter was with a young girl whose uncle was in the Navy. "She was about nine years old and had come in from the Midwest. Jonah took to her from the first encounter, and she him. When she would see us come in, she'd ask if she could walk him. One day she asked if she could take Jonah to a quiet spot in the room. She sat on the floor, hugging and petting her new friend. Then she started to talk - not to me, but to Jonah. She told him her uncle was still missing, that he was still in the Pentagon and she'd never see him again, and that she was afraid. Jonah just lay there and let her continue to pet and hug him."

Brian Thompson noted the special magic dogs seemed to work with children. "You could see their blank expressions fade in the company of a dog," he said. One youngster's mother observed, "They can tell if your heart is broken." That "special skill" was one nearly every handler witnessed. Time after time their Golden retrievers seemed to have a special ability to find that one person in the crowd who was most in need of their company. Nowhere was that skill more needed than on the Pier 94 ferryboat shuttle to Ground Zero.

This Sacred Place

Shuttle ferries were operated from both Liberty Park and Pier 94 to rotate survivors to a specially designated platform at Ground Zero. The intent was to help bring some closure to the grieving, many of whom we now know will never be able to claim their loved ones' remains. Very early on, officials operating the Pier 94 shuttle decided to include therapy dogs on the journey.

Pier 94 Family Assistance Center: Nora Hayes fidgeted as she waited with her three-year-old Golden, "Finn," to enter the staging area to be introduced to other relief workers and then survivors who would join them for the boat trip and short walk to Ground Zero. After volunteering for this special duty, she was now having second thoughts. "I wondered if my little Golden boy and I would be able to cut the mustard, in the company of Red Cross, clergy, EMT's and other practitioners all well versed in disaster

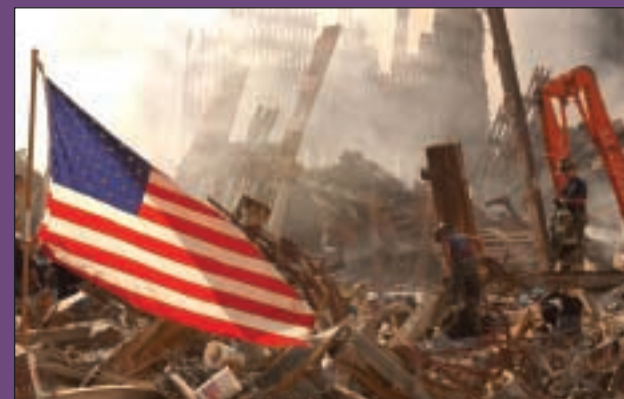
Top: The Canzoneri Golden retrievers pose outside St. Pauls Church, adjacent to Ground Zero, which miraculously escaped destruction and later became a depository for greetings and mementos from around the world. Between Jake and Jessie is puppy "Matty," named after a WTC victim as promised to his mother. Photo courtesy of Mario & Karen Canzoneri



Middle: Officers of NYPD were pleased to greet Golden retrievers Biscuit and Scarlett at Pier 94. Zionts and another handler drove from North Carolina on Thanksgiving. Photo courtesy of Peggy Zionts



Bottom: Therapy teams accompanied family members to a private viewing platform at Ground Zero. Photo courtesy of FEMA





Top left: In September this year victims' survivors and therapy teams gathered at a marker in the restored facade of the Pentagon. Photo courtesy of FEMA.

Top right: Jackie Morasco and Ally served at the Pentagon FAC. Their presence was welcomed by families and relief workers alike. The Boston Terrier, Jazmine, is also a certified therapy dog belonging to the same group from Maryland. Photo courtesy of Jackie Morasco

Bottom left: "Finn" comforted survivors on the Pier 94 shuttle ferry and gave owner/handler Nora Hayes (inset) the confidence to accompany them to the Ground Zero viewing platform. Photo courtesy of Nora Hayes

Bottom right: Laurie Collins and Irish were honored with a certificate commemorating their work at the Pentagon Family Assistance Center. Photo courtesy of Laurie Collins

work." She wondered, too, "Is this an appropriate place for a handler and dog to be, this sacred place?"

"Right after we arrived at the staging area, all of my apprehension melted away. Hands reached out for Finn, sad faces smiled down at him and grown men bent down to hug and kiss him. He brought his Golden face and Golden personality into a room filled with hurt and pain, and he helped and continued to help," Nora Hayes remembers.

On the ferry, "There was a young man who'd lost his firefighter brother. He spoke to no one. I could see the red flush going up the back of his neck as we got closer to Ground Zero. Finn climbed into the seat next to him. The man smiled and talked, but only to Finn. Finn also sat next to him on the Ground Zero viewing platform.

"As we walked together towards the disaster site, I

looked down and saw him looking back up at me with complete trust and confidence, as if he were saying, 'It's OK with me, Mom, if it's OK with you.' I was pretty scared by then. I wondered if I could handle what lay before us, and his trust helped me gain the courage I needed to help the families."

Later in the day, "Finn was asleep from exhaustion. A police officer stopped and asked when we'd be back. I told her, 'Soon.'"

Of course, the Golden Retrievers also had their typical Golden moments, too. And even that brought smiles, as Laurie Collins recalls of her work at the Pentagon Assistance Center with "Irish."

"Seeing someone with sad eyes crack a smile when they see Irish sneak up to steal another dog's stuffed duck, or hearing the laughs when they see him tossing the 'stolen duck' about. Listening to the chuckles as people get off the elevator to see him waiting there, this time holding his own stuffed duck."

On another occasion, "As a Red Cross worker was bending over and talking to him, Irish let out a very loud belch. But he got a big laugh even out of that!"

Memories and Memorials

Weeks and months after the assistance centers ceased operation, memories of the hundreds of therapy encounters lingered, sometimes nearly haunting both the therapy teams and those they'd visited.

At the October, 2001 Ground Zero memorial service, Karen Canzoneri met a woman whose son had been killed at the World Trade Center. The woman spoke adoringly of her departed Matthew, who she said had been so very fond of animals. Karen promised her next Golden Retriever would be named in the woman's son's honor. And they parted.

Weeks later, Judy Laureano (Stonehill Kennels), a breeder and fellow Garden State GRC member, was so moved by the work Karen and husband Mario had done that she gave them a puppy. They named him "Matty." They longed to tell his namesake's mother but had no idea how to find her. A friend placed the following classified notice in *The New York Times* on April 14, 2002:

"I am searching for the mother of a 'Matthew' who was lost at the WTC on 9/11. If you are the mother who had a long conversation with a therapy handler who made a promise, please contact me. The wish has come true." (Specifics of the promise were intentionally withheld.)

Two days later came this reply: "I do not know if I am the right person. I do know that I spent much time petting and being consoled by those special dogs and their owners. My son Matthew was indeed killed at the World Trade Center on September 11. I don't remember the details of much that has occurred since that awful day. I do remember speaking with a wonderful couple who said their next dog would lovingly be named Matthew or Matt. Could that have been you? Whatever your intent, I am grateful for your loving

concern and hope to hear from you." The Canzoneris phoned her the following day.

Aspiring Golden breeder Gretchen Hegeman lost her brother-in-law, U.S. Navy Captain Larry Getzfred, at the Pentagon. In the weeks following, her sister and two young nieces spoke frequently of numerous uplifting encounters with a Golden Retriever at the family assistance center. Anxious to arrange a reunion, she was saddened to learn the dog she was looking to find, Peggy Dobbins' "Jazzy," had died quite unexpectedly early this year. In tribute to Jazzy, Hegeman plans to donate puppies to search and rescue and to the children of deceased New York firemen.

In the year gone by, awards and commendations have deservedly abounded for therapy teams. Noteworthy, though, are excerpts of a letter Elaine Shoe, director of the Thera-Pet group, received from Brian Thompson. While it specifically directs praise to Shoe's Golden, "Skye," the letter very eloquently characterizes sentiments expressed by many other people, about many other Golden Retrievers who also served.

"As one would imagine, daily life on the Pier was not easy. It was extremely stressful, not only for the families but also for the workers from the more than 60 city, state, federal and volunteer organizations that came together to aid in the recovery effort.

"My job (assistant director) at the Family Assistance Center required me to be on the floor quite often; it was in this capacity I had the opportunity to observe Skye on a daily basis. It appeared that every time I turned around I would see Skye with a family or volunteer worker. Observing Skye as she gently and lovingly bonded with children and adults alike brought tears of joy to my eyes. I knew the families would be in 'good paws' when Skye boarded the ferry to help escort the families to Ground Zero. The trip to Ground Zero was probably the most emotional time for the families as they observed first hand the site where their loved ones were lost. It was on the ferry trip back to Pier 94 where Skye did her best work."

Lessons Learned

The work done by therapy teams a year ago September gained high visibility for animal-assisted therapy. Subsequently, therapy organizations have spent and continue to spend much effort on upgrading training and qualification programs for handlers and dogs. Much remains to be done, though, in integrating therapy into disaster response contingency plans.

A recurring lesson as we reflect on the events of last fall is that heroes and heroines are anything but mythical-styled figures and don't come ten feet tall. Peggy Zions, who drove with her Golden, "Biscuit," and two other therapy teams to spend last Thanksgiving at Pier 94, noted afterwards, "Non-New Yorkers hear repeatedly on the news the term 'Hero.' I have personally met some of them, and they don't realize that they are." You've got that right, Peggy, because you're one, too.

Heroes have turned out to be people we brush elbows with nearly every day in the course of our lives: our policemen, our firefighters, our neighbors. And yes, even our neighbors' Golden Retrievers. Thank goodness for them all.



Remembrance

Laurie Collins and Irish were invited to memorial services at the Pentagon this past September 11. Afterwards, she wrote:

"As we were escorted to our seats before the ceremony, we got applause from some of the spectators. I'm sure they thought we were part of the search and rescue teams, but regardless, it was nice to see the dogs were appreciated!

"Before the ceremony started, Irish and I went down to the marker where the airplane struck the Pentagon wall. That was a pretty emotional moment, thinking that just a year before there was such devastation in that exact spot, so many lives lost. But now, due to the strong American spirit and the resolve of the workers to get the building fixed ahead of schedule, the Pentagon stands strong once again.

"The ceremony itself was very moving. Just prior, they showed a video of some of the quilts that were made and cards and letters and drawings that were sent after September 11. There were quite a few by children – children who should never have had to experience the horror of that beautiful September day – children who I pray are healing and learning again that there is more good than evil in man. There were quite a few hardhats in the crowd, and when the construction workers were pointed out, they got a big round of applause.

"Unfortunately, we weren't sitting with the families, we were a little ways behind them, but Irish still managed to get a lot of petting. Several people said they remembered the dogs at the assistance center, and almost everyone smiled when they saw them at the service. Afterwards, we went down to the grassy area near the marker, and some of the family members were down there. Once again, Irish was a big hit and children of the family members came over to pet him.

One little boy in particular spent quite a bit of time talking to us, telling us all about his Golden Retriever and German Shepherd. I was glad he was able to focus on Irish for a few minutes rather than the significance of the day. I was looking for the little girl we had befriended last year, but I didn't see her. Since she lives in the Midwest, it's possible she didn't make the trip. Sadly, her uncle was honored at Arlington National Cemetery the next day as one who was never identified. I can only hope Irish's special friend found a dog back home to help her heal."