

# pet therapy:

## a new way of reaching students with additional disabilities

By Kimberly Mockler

**T**homas is a profoundly deaf student with cerebral palsy. He has difficulty sitting or staying in one place for longer than a minute and is constantly moving around the classroom. He also used to have difficulty focusing on his school work or making eye contact with his teachers, teacher assistants, and peers—until Penni started coming to visit.

Penni is a 13-year-old Pembroke Welsh corgi who was originally bred and trained by Canine Companions for Independence to be a hearing dog for the deaf. She ended up as a therapy dog visiting schools for the deaf instead. Penni has now been visiting Mill Neck Manor School for the Deaf on Long Island, New York, with her owner, Florence Scarinci, for over a decade, and has recently started making regular visits to my classroom at St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf in Brooklyn, New York.

When Penni comes to visit, Thomas goes to his favorite blue inflatable chair and sits down (something he rarely does without prompting). He is learning to focus on and maintain eye contact with Penni for periods of time long enough during which to pet her, play with her,



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*Photos courtesy of Kimberly Mockler*

and give her treats. It is extremely difficult for Thomas to sit calmly and quietly for any extended period of time or to make eye contact or focus on any one thing. Penni is helping Thomas learn these essential behaviors in addition to other behaviors, such as interacting appropriately with a dog and playing fetch. These behaviors help Thomas experience different types of interactions and focus on needs other than his own, important skills for him to acquire. Thomas is just beginning to transfer the skills he is learning during his visits with Penni to times when she is not in the classroom. He is making slow but steady progress and is showing a lot of potential and improvement, especially in terms of eye contact and his ability to sit quietly and complete his school work.

Therapy dogs like Penni aid in instruction in a variety of ways. They are particularly suited to work with preschool-aged children and special needs populations where the curriculum most easily can incorporate a therapy dog into lessons. With these two populations, therapy dogs can assist with teaching eye contact (a vital lesson within classrooms for the deaf), turn taking (i.e., playing a game of fetch or Hide-and-Seek with the dog), and fine motor skills (i.e., brushing the dog and pouring water into a bowl for him or her).

Therapy dogs can also assist during cooking lessons (the students bake dog biscuits, of course!) and help students learn how to become “dog trainers” by having the therapy dog run through a mini-agility course set up in the classroom or follow signed or visual commands by the students. Students also learn about dog ownership and dog care by brushing the dog, giving him or her treats, playing games with the dog, and learning about dogs in general.

While most therapy dogs are hearing and trained auditorally, there are some deaf therapy dogs and hearing therapy dogs who are trained visually (using American Sign Language, standard obedience hand signals, or a combination of the two). These visually trained dogs are ideal therapy dogs for classrooms with deaf and hard of hearing students. Penni is one such therapy dog that is ideally suited to visit classrooms for the deaf.

Karen Papsasgergiou, a special needs teacher at Mill Neck Manor School for the Deaf, said, “I thought pet therapy might be the best way for the students to understand unconditional love. Little did I know that after 10 years, we would have surpassed my wildest dreams and had some of the most successful moments with Florence Scarinci and Penni. Throughout the 10 years, they have assisted my students in times of emotional need, during



language lessons, on trips, introduced our students to breeders, assisted us at the Westminster Dog Show, baked dog biscuits, assisted in a Christmas sale to raise money for canine victims of Hurricane Katrina, trained us to understand agility training, and many more experiences. The students don’t even realize they’re learning, but instead intrinsically incorporate Penni and Florence into their lives.”

Scarinci, in turn, expressed that “it was my sincere wish that she [Penni] would change one person’s life for the better. Little did I know that the person whose life she would change would be me and that as a therapy dog she would touch hundreds of lives.” Penni has also been recognized for the impact she has had on others. She was nominated by the students of Mill Neck to be the American Kennel Club’s Therapy Dog of 2007 (Award for Canine Excellence)—and she won!

In addition to visiting schools for the deaf to help students like Thomas learn school behaviors and life skills that will help them become successful, Penni and other therapy dogs also visit nursing homes, assisted living facilities, hospitals, psych units, centers for children/adolescents/adults with developmental disabilities, libraries, colleges, and any facility that feels their population can benefit from a therapy dog and requests a single visit or regular visits.

For more information about having a trained therapy dog visit your school or facility, or to learn more about deaf ASL-trained therapy dogs, please visit <http://www.deltasociety.org>.