

# Therapy dog visits assisted living facilities

If you visit an assisted living facility in New Castle, you may see a large, happy dog going from room to room. Oscar, a 6-year-old English cream golden retriever, is a therapy dog who regularly visits Glen Oaks, The Waters, Addison Place and Forest Ridge, spreading joy to all the residents. Very often, Oscar wears a hat or a costume, to the delight of all who see him.

Oscar belongs to New Castle residents Nancy and Mike Fort. He was adopted from a shelter in Northern Ohio at the age of 3. When he came to live with the Forts, he had no training of any kind. Since he had never been inside of a house, he wasn't potty-trained and he didn't know how to go up and down stairs. But the Fort's soon saw that Oscar learned quickly and that he really loved people. Nancy knew right away that Oscar had the gentle, easy-going temperament to be a therapy dog.

She enrolled him in a basic manners class at the local animal shelter, and then several more advanced classes, and then the canine good citizen and therapy dog class offered by Whitewater Dog Training Club in Richmond, Indiana. A little over a year later, Oscar was tested and certified by Therapy Dogs International.

He began his work as a therapy dog visiting just one nursing home, but soon added more and more sites. Over the past two years, he has made over 150 therapy visits, including Henry Community Health, elementary schools, a local college and even a church! Recently, Oscar had the honor of welcoming WWII and Korean War veterans home from their honor flight.

Unlike service dogs or emotional support animals, a therapy dog is trained to give comfort and affection to everyone and Oscar does just that. On his very first therapy visit,

Nancy and Oscar entered the building and saw a woman sitting alone in the lobby. Oscar immediately went over to her and put his head on her lap.

"You just made my day!" the woman exclaimed, adding that she had just moved to the facility and did not know anyone. "I was sitting here, feeling sorry for myself, just about ready to cry. I feel so much better now. How can anyone be sad when this happy boy is around?"

Another time, when Oscar entered a hospital room and the patient's face lit up, the nurse said, "That's first time I have ever seen this patient smile!"

According to Therapy Dogs International, "Animals have long been recognized as a positive addition to the healing process."

Once, a gentleman that Nancy and Oscar visited regularly was gravely ill. Oscar laid his head on the bed, close to the man's face. The patient was so weak he could barely speak, but he gently stroked Oscar's head.



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**TOP:** Oscar visits Addison Place resident Hilda Kassen. **MIDDLE:** Oscar visits with students at a local elementary school. **BOTTOM:** Oscar visits Senior Living at Forest Ridge resident Wendell Keesling.

Photos provided



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“I really thought that we would never see him again,” Nancy said. But the following week, the man was sitting up in his chair, ready for Oscar’s visit. “The nurse told us that they all thought they were going to lose him, but after Oscar’s visit he suddenly started improving.”

Visits from therapy dogs have shown an increase in happiness, calmness and overall emotional well-being. Therapy dogs provide a break from the daily routine not only for residents, but for visitors and staff as well. Oscar always makes sure to spend time with the staff when visiting a facility.

One employee recently said, “Today is supposed to be my day off. The only reason I agreed to come in today was to see Oscar!”

Studies have shown a decrease in blood pressure and stress levels during therapy dog visits. One of Oscar’s favorite places to visit is the Ivy Tech campus during finals week. He goes from classroom to classroom, greeting

each and every student and staff member, helping them to relax before tests.

Oscar usually does two to three therapy visits per week, but when he is not working as a therapy dog, he spends his time with the Fort’s other dog, Casper. He also loves his daily trips to the dog park to play with his doggy friends.

If you would like more information about therapy dogs, visit the Therapy Dogs International website: [tdi-dog.org](http://tdi-dog.org). To request a visit from Oscar, email Nancy Fort at [nefort26@gmail.com](mailto:nefort26@gmail.com).

*Nancy Fort is a retired teacher and professor. She lives in New Castle with her husband, Michael Fort, owner of Lee’s Famous Recipe Chicken. The couple has two adult daughters, Emma and Annie.*



A little rain doesn’t stop Oscar from going on therapy visits.

Photo provided

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