

TRAVELING SIDE BY SIDE WITH LOVE

by Phyllis A. Hemann, *Perspective* Editor
Photos by Bob Ocken

Scarlett Harris doesn't mind a puppy kiss or belly rub now and then - it's part of what kept her going during the rough patches of cancer treatment.

In fact, she knows the healing power of love first hand - something she had an abundance of while struggling with breast cancer - love from her husband, family, friends and her five puppy dogs.

"Just the presence of a dog is calming - They make you forget about cancer and focus on those little moments of love."

If it wasn't for dogs, Harris might not have discovered her breast cancer as soon as she did.

THE WISDOM OF A DOG

Like many women, Harris said she didn't consistently perform a breast self-exam.

But after attending a guest lecture at UALR, she decided to do one. She found a lump. It was August, and her last mammogram was in June.

The guest lecturer was a woman who found out she had cancer after her dog kept pawing at her breast. The woman found she had a lump that turned out to be cancer.

"That dog saved two lives," Harris said.

The dog's name was Angel.

After finding the lump, Harris went to the doctor. But they couldn't find the lump, again. She put off a mammogram until December. After a biopsy, she heard the word cancer.

"It's something you never think you'll hear. And it's a surreal, weird feeling. When I found out, I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I thought: 'Do I go to work or not? What do I do?' I went to work. I also called my husband, sister and mom. Everyone was at work."

Her husband, Russ, a psychiatric nurse, wanted to know the medical details - what kind was it and what options did she have for treatment. What he didn't tell her was that the news hit him hard.

"A friend at work told me later that he came to her after I told him and cried. He didn't tell me that. He put up a strong front. Later, we cried together - and he said 'if there was any way it could be me instead, I'd

make it so.' He was my rock throughout," she said. "And it's kinda nice to have a nurse around when you're sick."

Her treatment for breast cancer included a lumpectomy, chemotherapy and radiation at CARTI/North Little Rock.

For Harris, it was doubly hard, as she already suffered from a chronic illness - Hepatitis C. It's not something you expect, she said, to get another major illness when you're dealing with a chronic one.

"We were really scared about how it would affect my liver. I did get really sick with chemotherapy. It took a longer time for me to process the drugs out of my system. But so far so good," she said. "My liver seems to have come out of this okay."

When she first walked through the door at CARTI/North Little Rock, she didn't know what to expect.

"I was a crier through this whole thing. I was so scared. I was sitting off to the side. I started to cry, but hid it. The lady at the front desk noticed. She rolled over and acknowledged that I was going through a tough time. She let me know she was there if I

needed her," she said.

It was the first indication that CARTI was about more than just treatment.

"You go every day for treatment and you build relationships. I didn't look forward to the radiation, but I did look forward to seeing the people there who took care of me. When I finished my treatments, I wasn't prepared to miss that support. You get used to it after going every day. It becomes routine. All of the sudden, I'd be in the car driving and having a bad day - and I wanted to go to CARTI. I got such wonderful support from them that it made an impression."

And one of the things that impressed her most, was the complete compassion of the therapists at CARTI - a compassion that made them in tune with her feelings as a patient.

"One day, I was just too tired. I had a lot of fatigue from my treatments. I started crying. I just couldn't do it anymore. One of my [radiation therapists] sat down

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Scarlett Harris with Maggie & Kosmo

beside me and reassured me that a lot of people get to this place. 'You can do this.' I kept thinking about those words she said to me."

The reassurance stuck in Harris' mind and gave her strength to take another step.

"She didn't rush me through. She took the time to stop and sit with me. If she hadn't, I don't think I would have finished my treatments."

She still takes those words with her, every day. When she participated in the Race for the Cure after her treatment, she didn't think she could make it to the finish line. Her husband walked by her side.

"I turned the corner and wasn't sure I could make it any further. My husband pointed out all the people. 'That's the finish line.' He encouraged me," she said. "And I remembered what she said to me that day at CARTI and I crossed that finish line. I even walked in the survivor's parade after that."

FOUR-LEGGED HEALERS

A support system is vital to cancer patients, and Harris believes in the power of unconditional love as part of the healing process.

And some certain five dogs play a big role in providing Harris and her husband with unconditional love.

Harris and her husband have a soft spot for dogs, and have rescued many of their pets.

And one of those pets doles out the love in an unusual way - to everyone she meets.

Maggie, her Great Dane and mastiff mix, is a trained and certified therapy dog, and a bit of a celebrity with those she meets.

Animal-assisted therapy was a natural extension of Harris' work as a social worker. Approximately four years ago, she saw a program on using dolphins in therapy for autistic children. It inspired her to pursue animal-assisted therapy.

She found Maggie through the Arkansas Great Dane Rescue after waiting for a dog who matched the temperament requirements needed for therapy dogs.

"She's the best therapy dog, amazing really. She's calm and gorgeous. She draws attention. This dog just has a way about her."

And Maggie's gentle nature, friendly curiosity and "never met a stranger" attitude made her perfect for animal-assisted activities and therapy.

"There will always be this moment when she connects with people. You can see it when she looks into their eyes. It's so cool to get to be the person who's with her," she said smiling. "I tell people I'm her assistant - her driver, cook, groomer."

Harris and Maggie are certified through the Delta Society's Pet Partners Program. The Delta Society is an international organization "dedicated to improving human health through therapy and service animals."

The impact animals have on illness is a hot topic in the research world. Of course, it's an impact that Harris knows first hand.

"A lot of research is going on now. One of the things they say about dogs is that they lower your blood pressure. I've seen it for myself when I'm with Maggie. I've seen it on the monitor where the heart rate goes down while petting her."

And it's something she's witnessed. On the night of her first chemo treatment, Harris had a panic attack.

"I was scared. I felt trapped, claustrophobic. My husband was helping me, but I couldn't get calmed down. He told me to lie down on the floor. Well, in our house that means one thing for the dogs - play time. They mobbed me," she said laughing. "I know the power for myself. Those dogs calmed me down. Soon I was laughing and playing with them."

Maggie and one of her dachshunds stayed in bed with her on the days after chemotherapy.

"They stayed with me all the time. They were such a comfort. On those chemo days, you don't want to get up. But with dogs, you can't do that. They need you to care for them. And in return, they care for you."

As a cancer survivor, one of Harris and Maggie's most special visits is to the children's oncology unit. In fact, Harris and Maggie focus their therapy mission on children, because this big dog has a special love for the little ones. They've even worked as part of a reading program where the child reads to a dog, and improves the child's confidence and reading ability.

One of her younger dogs, Kosmo - a black-and-

white spaniel mix - is working on her training as a therapy dog. She's not quite as mellow as Maggie, Harris said, but she's working on it.

Rounding out the Harris' pack are two dachshunds - Josie and Sam (their old lady at 14), and the newest addition and only boy, Skipper, who came to live with them after his owner moved into an assisted living facility. Harris would take him to visit his owner, who just recently passed away.

"My oncologist's nurse told me about this lady and her dog. She was in assisted living and her dog was at home. Her neighbors were caring for the dog. I tried to find him a home, but I fell in love with him."

BUILDING A COMMUNITY

And that's one of the added perks of dog ownership - building bonds with others. Harris became friends with the lady who owned Skipper, all because of the bond they built between them and the little black dog.

"Dogs open up a lot of doors. People relax around dogs. They open up conversations. People reminisce about animals they've had and about other things. To put it simply, dogs are therapeutic."

One of the hardest things about treatment for Harris was not being able to take her partner in therapy to do their rounds. During her downtime, she took coursework on preparing dogs and handlers for animal-assisted therapy activities.

About a year ago, she and a friend, also a fellow cancer survivor, started a group for people who do

animal-assisted therapy. Her friend died in January from mouth cancer - that friend, she said, was the one teaching the class that had the guest lecturer who led Harris to discover her breast cancer.

She also participates in a cancer support group. She recently shared a piece of artwork with them that embodied her cancer experience.

"I knew I'd make something. All through my treatment, I kept things - identity bracelets, stickers, my port. The medical people would ask why and I'd tell them I would make art with it. After about a year, I was ready to make something. I made a collage - an assemblage piece. It was my scarves that I wore wrapped around a basket with all the things I collected. I took it to my cancer support group and they could relate to it."

She also kept a journal of her experiences - a pink one she bought the day before her surgery. She used a few pieces of it in her collage, but wants to do something more with it.

"I really want to write about cancer, but I'm not sure what I'll do. I'll get there when I heal enough. Creativity is a great outlet. It helps when you have something else to focus on," she said. "Stay connected with friends. Have fun. Even taking the dogs out for a short hike provides an outlet for me. How you spend your time can impact not only how you feel, but also how you heal."

