



Divine Canines

Founded in 2004, *Divine Canines* provides animal assisted therapy to people of all ages. Volunteer teams visit children and adults facing various challenges, including mental illness, developmental differences, physical limitations and dementia. Therapeutic interaction with specially-trained canines results in emotional and physical benefits such as improved mood, confidence, communication, relaxation and trust. Visits to partner facilities are conducted by multiple volunteer teams and last at least one hour.

The organization's success is based on two simple premises: First, that there exists a deep,

mysterious bond of healing between humans and their dogs, and second, that dog enthusiasts comprise a responsible, dedicated and highly-driven volunteer demographic. The teams of volunteers who give their time to Divine Canines are made up of busy individuals who care about their community. Moreover, they appreciate and want to share the joy and unconditional love their dogs so freely give.

Physical and emotional wellness

Divine Canines trains and tests each team (dog and handler) to ensure confidence in all situations. An AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) title is a prerequisite for entering therapy dog



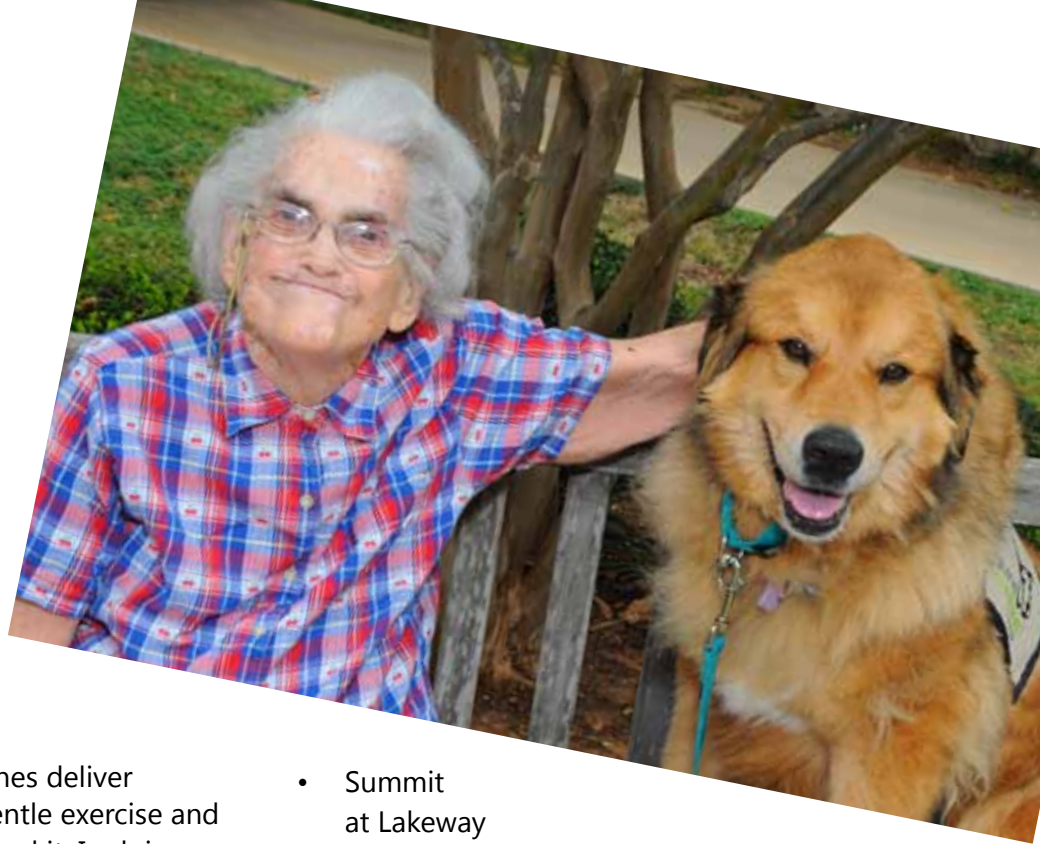
training, which includes intense classroom instruction as well as on-site experience with patients and medical equipment. Teams choose volunteer sites based on their interests. This promotes frequent, predictable contact, which builds strong bonds and fosters healing relationships.

As therapy animals, Divine Canines deliver unconditional love, affection, gentle exercise and companionship to those who need it. In doing so, they promote physical and emotional wellness.

Encouraging smiles, brightening lives

Divine Canines recruits and trains teams of dogs and their owners and organizes and facilitates regular, frequent visits to residents of special care facilities. Some of the facilities that benefit from animal assisted therapy include:

- Austin Children's Shelter (shelter for abandoned, abused and neglected children)
- Austin State Hospital (psychiatric hospital)
- Austin State Supported Living Center (school for persons with mental/developmental disabilities)
- Buckner Villas (Alzheimer's and dementia care)
- The Emeritus at Beckett Meadows (assisted living for the elderly)
- Fort Hood (military post)
- Helping Hand Home for Children (residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children)
- Pflugerville Care Center (nursing home)
- SPJST (nursing home and assisted living facility for elderly)
- St. David's Hospital (acute care unit)
- St. David's Rehabilitation Hospital (inpatient rehabilitation)



- Summit at Lakeway (assisted living for elderly)
- Summit at Northwest Hills (assisted living facility for elderly)
- The Windchime (assisted living, nursing home and hospice facility)

In addition, Divine Canines's therapy dogs also visit several schools and libraries in the community, offering a reading assistance program called "Barking Book Buddies" and reading assistance to students with dyslexia, special needs or mental/developmental disabilities.

Getting involved

Therapy dog training with Divine Canines is offered several times per year and a tax-deductible \$250 donation is required to participate in the training process. Dogs must pass an evaluation by Divine Canines's trainer and behaviorist Paul Mann and be Canine Good Citizen certified prior to enrolling in a class. The CGC certificate ensures that dogs entering therapy training have a solid obedience education—are able, for example, to sit and stay, and accept a friendly stranger. There are more than ten CGC evaluators listed in Austin. Divine Canines trainers are on this list and offer CGC preparation classes through the **Canine Center for Training and Behavior**. (see Business Profile on pg. 27)

“People often ask: Why dogs? What is so special about dogs? I feel dogs connect people of all ages with their very best memories and experiences. When a person isolated and suffering sees a dog, I witness an unconscious sense of nostalgia being evoked. Within seconds, the child who is stressed about their reading struggles or the wounded warrior suffering from PTSD connects with one of their happiest memories and they relax and smile and communicate. Dogs don’t judge and they are amazing listeners. At the end of the day, one of a human’s most basic needs is to be loved and to be heard. Dogs provide both needs with a wagging tail.” Heidi Armstrong, President, Divine Canines.



All photos by Heidi Armstrong

Training to become a Divine Canines volunteer introduces concepts particular to what dogs and their handlers typically encounter in populations with unpredictable behavior, including those with mental illness, physical disabilities and other developmental disabilities. Dogs are exposed to various types of medical equipment and patients during training. Handlers are also coached on how to ensure their dogs remain comfortable at all times and maintain control during the sometimes intense, but always rewarding, visits.

Divine Canines suggests that volunteers with dogs make at least two visits (of 60-90 minutes each) per month. This ensures that volunteers and their dogs maintain the high level of skills they achieved in training.

Don't have a dog but want to help? Divine Canines needs hands and hearts to help with fundraising, special events and program development. There is a place at Divine Canines for you.

www.divinecanines.org



'Divine Canines'

