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Training animals to serve as therapists for humans

Sometimes man's best friend is man's best therapist

By MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

Training pooches to be good therapy dogs is the singular mission of the New York-based Good Dog Foundation. The human-animal bond can be a useful tool in the healing process — be it a disaster site or bedside with a patient.

It was that bond between humans and animals that Bruce G. Geary sought to preserve through his foundation. Recently, the Good Dog Foundation received a grant of \$25,000 from the Geary Foundation to expand a program to offer therapy-dog training, certification and dog visits on Staten Island.

The Good Dog therapy-dog teams — handler and pooch — will be trained at the Staten Island LGBT Community Center and visit patients, students, clients and staff at the center. The grant will allow Good Dog to expand on Staten Island. Currently, the organization has about 1,100 dog-and-handler teams that visit facilities in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Mr. Geary, who died in 2007, was raised on Staten Island and lived in his childhood home. He graduated from Wagner College in 1952 with a degree in finance. He worked for 50 years in investment banking and, at the end of his life, worked as a stockbroker at Smith Barney.

According to Raymond J. Pezzoli, Mr. Geary's lawyer and an officer of the Bruce G. Geary foundation, Mr. Geary didn't have many material interests. He didn't wear fancy suits or drive a nice car. He was a member of St. Mary's church on Staten Island. He was an avid reader, but didn't travel much because he'd been in the Navy and "seen the world," says Mr. Pezzoli. His only modest expense was seeing the occasional Broadway show.

"There was nothing flashy about the man," says Mr. Pezzoli, adding that Mr. Geary had requested not to have a headstone on his grave. "But, we put one up for him."

Before his death, Mr. Geary sat down with his close friends and developed a foundation for the care and protection of animals. He loved animals and had cats and dogs as pets, says Mr. Pezzoli.

But, the decision to leave the bulk of his estate to animal-related causes was curious and Mr. Pezzoli recalls having multiple discussions with Mr. Geary about the decision. Mr. Pezzoli says that Mr. Geary told him, "Animals need help and I'd rather the money go to the care and upkeep of animals."

So the foundation, with roughly \$18 million in assets, primarily funds organizations in the New York region and groups that Mr. Pezzoli says Mr. Geary would have liked to support. Grants have supported the Staten Island Zoo and various animal rescue groups in the borough. The foundation has also supported animal therapy programs at the Ronald McDonald House New York and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, among many other organizations.

"We're doing something that we care about and helping Bruce by giving money to various organizations," says Mr. Pezzoli. "We're doing something for society."