

GIM “Friendly Visitors” at Guilford House

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By



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Patrizia DiLonardo has an Italian accent that reminds 73 year-old Eleanor Denenberg of her son-in-law, who also hails from Italy. Marie Fletcher's memory sometimes fails her now that she's in her 90s, but she always remembers Janine Townes, who brings Fletcher a soft-serve McDonald's ice cream with every visit. Marion Ranny, also in her 90s, has no trouble recognizing the friendly face of Nancy Faitch and everyone knows Cody, the gentle spaniel/setter mix arriving from Madison with Robert Trupin to visit Milton Bernblum each week.

DiLonardo, Townes, Faitch, and Trupin (and Cody) are weekly Guilford Interfaith Ministries (GIM) Friendly Visitors to Guilford House on West Lake Avenue. There, they connect face-to-face, for an hour at a time, with residents who otherwise have little social contact with the outside world.

"They're giving the gift of friendship on their weekly visits," said Lori Wells, GIM Friendly Visiting director. "I'm only here to match people; they are the true heroes here."

Although Friendly Visiting has been sending volunteers to local homes since 1990, the Guilford House connections just began in April 2008, shortly after Wells was hired. She contacted Guilford House with the idea and reached its administrator, Cathleen O'Connor, who instantly agreed to the concept.

While just four residents currently receive the special benefit of Friendly Visiting each week, the recent addition of eight-year-old Cody has served to spread cheer among many more Guilford House residents. The white and tan dog, adopted from the Humane Society, is gentle beyond compare. Cody seems to like nothing more than laying his head on a lap or sitting quietly at the feet of just about any resident he encounters during Trupin's weekly stop.

"They make dog biscuits here as an activity-and you can guess how many are for Cody," says Wells, laughing.

Trupin was visiting individuals at their homes with Cody when he thought of the idea of bringing Cody along to Guilford House, too. After receiving clearance from Guilford House and a thorough "vetting" by his veterinarian, Cody was allowed to join Trupin and has been a Guilford House sensation ever since.

Wells said the success of the Guilford House program reflects the "neighbor helping neighbor" mission of GIM Friendly Visiting.

"We feel our weekly contact with those we visit helps to enable people to stay socially connected to our community. It's a simple concept, but one that's so valuable. The friendships that blossom out of the weekly visits are about quality of life [and] my wonderful volunteers often tell me they are the ones that benefit from the friendships," she said.

DiLonardo agreed, adding she really looks forward to meeting with Denenberg.

"Lori found the perfect match for me, because Eleanor can understand my accent! The old stories are the best. It's fun," said DiLonardo, who began volunteering about three months ago.

To volunteer for GIM Friendly Visiting or to recommend someone who would enjoy a visit, contact Lori Wells at 203-453-8359 or gim_fv@att.net. To learn more, visit www.gimct.org.