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"Jenny will sit and let me pet her forever. Pets make such a difference when you're older and alone. I never feel like a dog is going to hurt me or cheat me."

— JEAN BASSETT, a retired purchasing agent who lives at the Little Sisters of the Poor home



Scott Varley/Staff Photographer

Sister Anne greets Jenny, a collie who has become part of the family at San Pedro's Little Sisters of the Poor home for the aged. Two resident collies and shepherd mix Cosmo, a therapy dog who visits weekly, bring smiles to the residents.

4-legged therapy

Cosmo, Jenny and Rayak bring happiness to residents of San Pedro home for the aged

By Donna Littlejohn
Staff Writer

Bing Varias lights up as a regular visitor approaches in a hallway at the Little Sisters of the Poor home for the aged.

"Oh, Cosmo, you look so nice!" the home's activity director exclaims.

The 7-year-old shepherd-Akita mix dog — or at least his handler — is clearly in the holiday spirit.

Wearing reindeer antlers and a jingle bell collar, Cosmo stops to accept his customary pat from Varias. Cosmo's owner, Sharon Bolivar, the facility's bookkeeper, has taken the dog through a rigorous training program to get him certified as a therapy dog.

And padding along for the ride are Jenny and Rayak, two black-and-white border collies who live at the Catholic home on Western Avenue in San Pedro.

The therapy dogs have been a new addition to Little Sisters this year, helping to bring cheer and normalcy to the residents.

Their effect on residents is visible.

"They calm them down, make them smile," said Mother Marguerite, home administrator.

Entering a private room, the dogs huddle near whom ever lives there, sitting or lying quietly while residents stroke their soft fur.

"Residents just get this radiant look on their faces," said Sister Genevieve, a staff member. "A lot of them had dogs before, but in old age the carpet gets pulled



Cosmo, who visits the home once a week, seems uncertain about his Christmas reindeer antlers. The 7-year-old shepherd mix is a certified therapy dog.

out from under them. So this helps."

As they make their regular Friday morning rounds, Bolivar knocks on residents' doors to announce their arrival.

"Cosmo's here," Bolivar calls out to Jean Bassett, a retired purchasing agent who has lived at Little Sisters for about a year.

Soon, the door opens and Bassett greets her furry visitor with a big smile.

"He's such a good boy," she coos as she leans over to pet Cosmo. "What's that you have on your head?"

Bassett has especially bonded with Jenny, the border collie Mother Marguerite brought into the home along with Rayak, another sheepdog who had been abused.

"Jenny will sit and let me pet her forever," Bassett said. "Pets make such a difference when you're older and alone. I never feel like a dog is going to hurt me or cheat me."

Beyond providing physical comfort, the dogs can sometimes foster a breakthrough in communicating with residents, staff members said.

When Cosmo visited one woman, she began to open up for the first time, Bolivar said.

"She told him all about what was going on, things she hadn't told anyone," Bolivar said.

Cosmo's especially sensitive to residents in wheel-

DOGS/A6

A6 Monday 12/24/07

Mother Marguerite leads the three dogs through the halls of San Pedro's Little Sisters of the Poor home. It's a weekly visit for Cosmo, a licensed therapy dog. The two border collies are full-time residents.

Scott Varley/
Staff Photographer



DOGS

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chairs and those in the final stages of life, she said. "He'll go right up to them and put his head in their lap," she said.

While Cosmo leaves at the end of the day to return home in San Pedro with his owners, Bolivar and her husband, the border collies are essentially community property, fixtures at the home.

They belong to everyone, although they clearly have a special bond with Mother Marguerite.

Several residents pitch in to help care for Jenny and Rayak, who have doghouses set up in a patio and a large outdoor grassy area in which to run. They are allowed to sleep indoors in common rooms of the house, depending on the weather.

Ann Coyne, a retired registered nurse at the home, feeds Jenny and Rayak and tends to their needs.

"I'm from Ireland and grew up on a sheep farm," she said.

She and other residents volunteer to take the dogs on regular walks.

There's a veterinarian office next door to Little Sisters where the dogs are bathed and given medical treatment when needed.

And Mother Marguerite, Coyne and Bolivar have been known to take the sheepdogs to San Pedro's dog park for some doggie play time.

During the Christmas celebrations at Little Sisters this week, Rayak, Jenny and Cosmo will join with residents as they tour the home's manger scenes, sing carols and exchange gifts.

"They're such good therapy for the residents," Coyne said.

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