

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Four-legged friend raises patients' spirits

By [MONA SHADIA](#)

2013-12-20 15:22:36



MISSION VIEJO – Jim Mulrooney was sitting in his wheelchair in a hallway of Mission Hospital's Acute Rehabilitation Unit when he spotted a four-legged black beauty walking slowly toward him.

"Is that Mocha?" Mulrooney said.

It was indeed Mocha, a 9-year-old Labrador retriever that Mulrooney said has brought him joy and, on a recent visit, got him to move his hands with more speed.

"She picked up my spirit," Mulrooney said, looking at Mocha and stroking her head and back. His voice cracked, he stopped for a few seconds to regain his composure, then said, "I was laying there and couldn't move."

Mulrooney, 58, of Irvine was admitted to Mission Hospital on Dec. 4 after having a stroke. It affected his left side, he said, but not his speech or memory.

Mocha is one of seven therapy dogs who visit the hospital. She gets patients to temporarily forget what they're going through, said Christy Cornwall, director of community benefit at Mission Hospital. Cornwall developed the hospital's therapy-dog program nearly eight years ago.

Cornwall said she places a lot of value on the importance animals play in people's lives.

"I just know that there's just a special connection between people and animals, and I wanted to see us provide that for our own patients who are going through challenging times," she said.

Mocha, who lives with her owners, Rita and Don Tayenaka, in Mission Viejo, is a certified therapy dog. The Tayenakas take her to visit children at CHOC at Mission twice a month, and she visits Mission Hospital's rehabilitation unit once a month. Patients in the rehabilitation unit are transitioning from other units in the hospital after suffering traumas such as brain injuries, heart attacks or strokes, Cornwall said.

The Tayenakas also make a point of bringing Mocha to CHOC at Mission on Christmas Day, something they started doing in 2011.

"To me, it just makes a difference in their life," Rita Tayenaka said. "I feel bad for those little kids. They're stuck in a hospital on Christmas."

The Tayenakas got Mocha when she was 7 weeks old to train her for Guide Dogs of America. They have trained six dogs for the nonprofit organization, which provides guide dogs to those with disabilities.

A medical issue meant Mocha didn't make the cut, and she was given back to the Tayenakas.

"She needed a job," Rita Tayenaka said. "We already had our second dog to train and Mocha was staying home most of the time. We felt bad and we were like, 'Let's see if we can find something for her.'"

They decided to get Mocha certified as a therapy dog with CHOC at Mission and Mission Hospital's programs.

"Therapy dogs are not made, they are born," said CHOC Child-Life Specialist Lisa Hadad, who's in charge of the therapy-dog program at the children's hospital. She said CHOC at Mission has seven dogs that make visits.

Cornwall praised owners like the Tayenakas for their dedication.

"I think all of our volunteers are really amazing and the selflessness that they have for the patients and the dedication they have is really remarkable," she said. "For them to come on Christmas Day is the epitome of holiday giving."

Back at the rehabilitation unit, Don Tayenaka put a chair next to Mulrooney and had Mocha jump on it. She began brushing her face against Mulrooney's, licking his face, arm and hand.

"She takes things off your mind," he said, smiling. Mulrooney was expected to go home Thursday.

"I'll be home for Christmas," he said.

For those who won't, Mocha will be there.

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