

# Pets provide happiness, lower stress for elderly

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Veterinary medicine students not only try to make the lives of animals better, but some work to improve the lives of humans, too.

Each year since spring 1994, members of the American Animal Hospital Association student chapter have taken selected dogs and cats to Manhattan's four nursing homes. Each home is visited once a month for nearly an hour by students and animals. During this time, residents of the homes can pet and even hold the animals.

Third-year veterinary medicine student Joan Emery said her 3-year-old Siamese cat, Jerry, has been in the program for three years.

"He sits right on their lap, they can pet him, and he just wants to curl up and go to sleep," Emery said.

"Their eyes just light up when they see him," Emery said. "It makes me feel good, because some of them don't have family to visit them."

Mike Finn, second-year student in veterinary medicine, said he sees the visit as a way to give something back to the community.

"I think it is a valuable way to spend time," Finn said. "I had been a volunteer in the hospital as an undergraduate, and I think people we visit enjoy it."

Dr. Kathy Gaughan, instructor of clinical sciences, said all of the animals taken to the homes first are put through a temperament test.

"We want to see how much they really want to do this," Gaughan said. "We want to see how much they really enjoy being around people."

Gaughan said the program was brought to her attention by students who had seen a similar program at Washington State University. The Students for the Humane Animal Relationship Experience got the K-State students interested.

"I was very interested, so I started evaluating pets for them," Gaughan said.

Gaughan said there are many benefits for the residents from the pets; one is the health benefit a pet offers.

"There has been a lot of research that says being able to have a pet can reduce blood pressure and stress," Gaughan said. "They also invite conversation, when many people may not have family close by, the animals provide an avenue for visiting."

Gaughan said AAHA requests that students making the visits with animals be members of the organization, because during club meetings, they discuss issues that would be important for them to know during the visit.

"If they were not bringing their pet, they can go if they would like to see what it is all about," Gaughan said.

Mike Nawrocki, third-year student in veterinary medicine, said the visits with the animals give the residents a chance to visit with people outside the nursing home.

"Not only do they get to see the animal, but they get to speak to a young person about what it was like way back when," Nawrocki said.