

'Elvis is here! Elvis is here!'

A wagging Social Determinant of Health

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

This month's focus theme on Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) brought back memories of my late Portuguese Water Dog, Elvis, and our visits to Rhode Island senior citizens living in nursing homes, a Veteran's home, and assisted living and rehab facilities.

Elvis was a certified therapy dog, a process that required him to be enrolled in a 10-week American Kennel Club (AKC) Canine Good Citizen's training class, and passing a series of tests. His final therapy certification exam took place in a hallway and in the lobby at Rhode Island Hospital. The toughest challenge came during the reaction-response portion, when the evaluator rolled quickly up to us in a wheelchair, as we sat in the lobby, waiting for

the results. Elvis jumped up, startled. So did I. Elvis had to retake the test on another day to pass.

Shortly afterwards, when he received his certificate, we began to visit an East Side nursing home. Our first encounter was with a woman with dementia. When I told her Elvis' name, she grinned. "Elvis is here! Elvis is here!" she shouted out. It became her habit when she saw him as we exited the elevator near the lounge. She would advance her wheelchair, pat him on the head, lift one of his ears and whisper words that sometimes sounded like babble.

When a columnist I worked with, who was in his 80s, fell at home, he wound up there for several months. Yehuda was a dog owner, and the sight of Elvis erased his intent frown as he scanned the pile of newspapers on his attached bed tray. At times, I would prod him to tell me about his post-war-time experiences, when he led displaced Holocaust survivors in refugee camps in Germany, by foot, along an 'Underground' route to Mediterranean ports and on to Palestine. "Elvis doesn't want to hear about that again!" he would say. "But he wants to hear about how you dodged the British blockade," I would answer.

We always visited Yehuda last, and as we left his room and walked towards the elevator, one resident would frequently navigate his walker to greet us. When he heard Elvis was a water dog, he told us about Ollie, his boyhood Labrador Retriever, who loved to swim. I showed him Elvis' webbed paws. "Labs have webbed paws, too," he said. Once he introduced us to his son, visiting from Chicago. "This must be Elvis. Dad has been telling me what a good boy you are." He looked at



Elvis and Mary. [PHOTO BY DENNIS KWAN]

me and said, "Thank you for talking to dad when you visit. I don't get back East as often as I would like to."

We usually ran into the same custodial engineer as we left the building, and he would pause and pet Elvis, a *cao de agua* like the ones he remembered in his native Algarve region in southern Portugal. He spoke to Elvis in Portuguese and Elvis always offered his paw.

When we visited the Rhode Island Veterans Home in Bristol, Elvis wore his red, white and blue flag neckerchief. He liked going here – he did not have to ride in an elevator like the one at the East Side nursing home, which made him nervous. We would visit vets in their rooms and one time when we entered one, there was a woman with a parrot at the bedside. "Hell-O!" the bird chirped. "Hell-O!" And, he spoke in phrases: "I'm a GOOD BOY!" We all laughed.

When the COVID pandemic is over, therapy pets will return, to bring smiles and solace to residents and patients, who may welcome them with a shout-out: "Elvis is here! Elvis is here!" Therapy and visitation animals, whether canine, avian or other species, can break the social isolation, bring smiles, and sometimes spark memories of days gone by – truly positive Social Determinants of Health in the broadest use of the term. ❖

