



SPREADING *Sunshine*

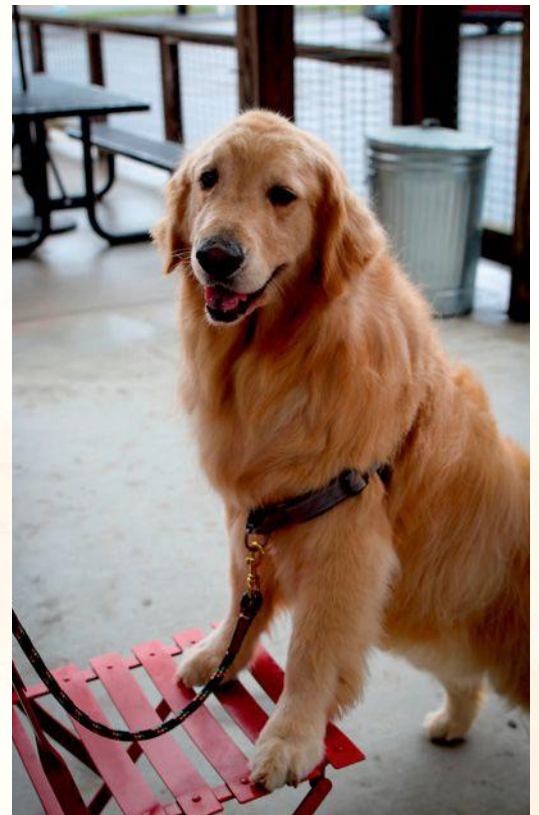
{ BY BAILEY MIX • PHOTOS BY NICHELLE EZELL & SUBMITTED }

IN THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES, we must find little moments of happiness to keep our spirits high and share the joy with those that need it the most. Healthcare workers face the worst of this pandemic. Many across the country are feeling overwhelmed, under-appreciated, and exhausted. These vital workers need a reason to smile and that is exactly what therapy dog Nelson is bringing to our local heroes. Nelson is a certified therapy dog with 4 Rivers Love on a Leash and visits wherever he is requested. Nelson has been brightening the spirits of employees at Mercy Health - Lourdes Hospital and Paducah Medical Pavilion over the summer and will continue his visits in the future. Nelson's caretaker, Kerrie Peck, says there are no words to describe what it is like to watch Nelson work. She explains how the joy he brings to people is incredible, stating, "it is like they forget about the world around them for a couple of minutes."

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Employees at Lourdes adore the visits from Nelson. One nurse exclaimed, "this is better than pizza!" after seeing Nelson entering her unit. Mercy Health is always searching for ways to show their employees that they support and value them. Jessica Toren, President of the Mercy Health Foundation - Paducah, says, "They work hard every day to provide outstanding patient care. As the pandemic continues on, people are becoming more tired and stressed. A visit from Nelson can take their mind off this, even for a few minutes."

Nelson's loving nature is contagious, spreading joy wherever he goes. However, three years ago, Kerrie could have never predicted that her rambunctious golden retriever puppy would one day become a therapy dog. Kerrie is a Paducah native, residing in the area her entire life. Over the years, she has followed her heart to three different careers; a teacher, banker, and a registered nurse. As a fellow nurse, Kerrie is empathetic



to the pressures healthcare workers face daily, even without a pandemic. She loves being able to share Nelson's gift with her Paducah and healthcare communities, a gift that was completely unexpected.

Kerrie has raised three different golden retrievers, and each has held a special place in her heart. Her first companion was named Lillie Nell, and the second was named Jackson. Nelson's name is a combination of the two, a tribute to the love Kerrie had for them. She brought Nelson home when he was just eight weeks old. Those early days kept Kerrie busy, as Nelson was a typical, playful puppy. She loved taking him on walks and showing him off to everyone. On one walk, she ran into a friend who also had a golden retriever. This friend was Melanie Watson, the chapter president for 4 Rivers Love On a Leash, a nonprofit group of volunteers that provides pet therapy to the community. She told Kerrie that they were about to begin an AKC Star puppy class. This class would teach basic commands and socialize the puppies. Kerrie decided to enroll Nelson in the class to refine his social skills. Little did she know, this would be the beginning of his journey to becoming a therapy dog.



Throughout the class, Melanie would tell Kerrie that there was something special about Nelson. Kerrie thought to herself, "he's smart and special to me, but he just seems like a typical puppy." But Melanie's affirmations during the first class inspired Kerrie to sign him up for the next, Canine Good Citizens. Nelson excelled in his training and eventually passed the final evaluation. His success piqued Kerrie's interest in volunteering for 4 Rivers Love on a Leash. This, however, would require a great deal of work for both Nelson and Kerrie. He needed rigorous training and exposure to a wide variety of stimuli. Kerrie spent hours working with him with help from mentors. She took him around town to get used to different potential triggers such as bicycles or kids playing. They developed a higher level of mutual respect and understanding. The work requires serious trust between dog and handler.

The training paid off; Nelson officially passed his test and was able to begin supervised visits. The pet therapy program requires ten hours of supervised practice visits before certification. Nelson shined during his sessions. He absolutely loved the attention and was a natural at soothing people. Kerrie describes how "Nelson has the type of eyes that when you look



Nelson with his caretaker, Kerrie Peck



into them, you know everything is going to be okay.” She was emotional after his first visit, knowing the impact her boy could have. The two completed the supervised visits and could begin their work independently. But, they had to wait to be called. Love on a Leash only serves the places that request or invite them, so Nelson and Kerrie eagerly waited for their assignment.

Eventually, Lourdes reached out to 4 Rivers Love on a Leash to set up pet therapy for their staff. Melanie knew Nelson would excel in this environment. It turned out to be a perfect fit; everyone fell in love with Nelson from the moment he walked through the door. The staff members regularly ask when he is coming back. It’s no secret that they all want to make sure he is coming to their department. He is a calming presence during the busy days at the hospital. Jessica Toren explains how Lourdes plans to continue these pet therapy visits long into the future. The positive feedback from staff and the impact on morale make it an easy decision.

While Nelson is strictly business during his pet therapy sessions, he gets to let out his silly side at home. Kerrie shares several funny stories of Nelson’s personality; running, playing, and trying to sneak unwanted items into the house. Every time

she gets home, he likes to bring her a gift, usually his dog bed. He stumbles over the bed the entire way, stepping on it as he drags it across the floor. Nelson also brings Kerrie other presents at random, like toys, the pillow off her bed, or anything he can find around the house. She describes him as nosy.

He enjoys supervising the neighborhood, watching every car and person as they pass. Kerrie never planned for Nelson to become a therapy dog, but she wouldn’t have it any other way. He has a special talent for making people comfortable, and she is glad to share that gift with the community. Kerrie’s goals for the future are to continue helping the community alongside Nelson wherever she can, for as long as they can.

If you would like to set up a pet therapy session with Nelson or another animal, contact “4 Rivers Love on a Leash” by sending a message through their Facebook page. The human and fur volunteers are ready to spread some sunshine!

Additionally, Mercy Health would like to extend a warm thank you to the Paducah community for supporting healthcare workers. They appreciate every kind word, encouraging card, and the prayers offered.

