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MY COMMUNITIES

Unforgettable, that's what she is

 **Photo gallery:** [Live-in therapy dog delights Nu'uaniu care facility](#)

 **Video:** [Labradoodle helps elderly in Nu'uaniu center](#)

By [Eloise Aguiar](#)

Advertiser Staff Writer

Most therapy dogs brought to hospitals and care homes visit for a short time and leave, but Hale Ku'ike has made Vita, a blond labradoodle, a full-time member of the staff.

After just three weeks at the Nu'uaniu facility for people with dementia and Alzheimer's, she has already had a positive effect on residents and staff, said David Fitzgerald, care home administrator.

"The amazing thing is the residents remember her name," he said. "The residents may not remember my name ... but they remember her name."

Calm and gentle, the dog quietly goes about her duties at Hale Ku'ike, offering a therapeutic touch and companionship to residents.

"Animals give a person the opportunity to care for something," Fitzgerald said. "Many of our residents receive care but they don't have the same opportunity. Now they can brush her hair and give her treats."

Vita has the run of the facility and she is greeted and petted by those who want to interact with her.

She is involved with group activities where residents learn to give simple commands and offer her treats when she obeys, said Dorothy Colby, facility business manager, head chef and now one of the dog handlers. Residents also groom her, take her for walks and exercise as she sits by and watches, Colby said.

A LITTLE LIFE, CHANCE TO LOVE

But the biggest advantage to having the dog at Hale Ku'ike is the personal contact, she said.

"She gives you a chance to give physical love to another living thing," Colby said.

Hale Ku'ike resident Joyce Brault said she enjoys just looking at the dog, who seems happy and always searching for crumbs beneath the table.

"I think everyone was thrilled because to have a little life going around perks up your spirit," Brault said.

Vita is a cross between a poodle and a labrador retriever. She's just over a year old but she's been training for this job all of her life with the Kahuku nonprofit Hawaii Fi-Do Service and Therapy Dogs, headed by Susan Luehrs.



Vita the Labradoodle keeps company with Hale Ku'ike resident Joyce Brault. The 1-year-old therapy dog's full-time job is to offer a therapeutic touch and company.

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Vita's training included listening to children read and visiting care facilities such as hospitals, abuse shelters and care homes. Unlike service dogs that do tasks for people, Vita is considered more of a therapy animal.

When Hale Ku'ike decided a full-time therapy dog would be good, Vita was slowly introduced to the idea by spending more and more time at the home, until she took up permanent residency, Luehrs said. The facility's staff was trained and Hawaii Fi-Do stays in touch to make sure the animal is adjusting properly.

Since this was the first placement of a facility dog for the organization, the process was a learning experience, she said.

And rather than charge a fee for the animal, which can cost \$2,000 just to purchase untrained, Hawaii Fi-Do accepted a donation for Vita, Luehrs said, adding that she has orders to place more facility dogs.

"It's heartwarming to see these residents interact with her," she said.

Reach Eloise Aguiar at eaguiar@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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Call: 638-0200

E-mail:

hifido@hawaii.rr.com
