

# Dog performers bring cheer to nursing home residents

Showcase part of a dog therapy session with animals trained to work with elderly

Shermaine Ang

Madam Kong, 77, has had some dull days with little entertainment, but on Saturday, she was smiling from ear to ear as she held a dachshund on her lap.

The dog lover, who has never had a pet dog before as her family was busy working, marvelled at the length of the dachshund. "It's this long," she gestured.

On Saturday, she got to pet the dachshund, three enthusiastic golden retrievers and two goldendoodles which had performed at the Singapore Christian Home.

The showcase was part of a dog therapy session offered by the Redhot Dymomutts Sayang Squad, a group of mutts trained to work with the elderly in nursing homes and young people struggling with mental health issues.

The Sayang Squad was started in 2019 by a group of pet owners who got to know one another through the obedience training classes their dogs attended. Three of them thought it would be meaningful for their dogs to perform tricks that learnt in class and bring joy to the elderly.

The dog trainer assessed that their dogs are suitable to be therapy animals because they like meeting people, obey basic commands and do not bark much, so they are unlikely to scare nursing home residents.

The 20 dogs in the group visit a different nursing home once a month, making their rounds among the Singapore Christian Home and all six NTUC Health nursing homes, in Geylang East, Pasir Ris, Jurong West, Jurong Spring, Chai Chee and Tampines.

Nine dogs from the group showed off their talents at the Singapore Christian Home on Saturday.



Redhot Dymomutts Sayang Squad co-founder Betty Leow high-fiving her dog Elsa at the Singapore Christian Home on Saturday. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

day morning.

When her owner sneezed, Arya the golden retriever, who has a good memory and a keen sense of smell, immediately brought a tissue box to her.

Teddy the energetic goldendoodle, dressed in a bib resembling a suit, rocked a dance routine with his owner.

Hugo the dachshund balanced a stack of 30 tiny treats on his nose, keeping perfectly still.

After the performances, the home's residents got to interact with the dogs.

The Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) linked Sayang Squad with the nursing homes.

Ms Heidi Rafman, chief of the AIC's healthy ageing division, said: "Animal-related activities are in demand and an area of interest for many seniors, especially those who may have had pets before they came to live at a nursing home."

Mr James Kuan, executive direc-

tor of the Singapore Christian Home, said the Covid-19 pandemic had taken a toll on social activities at the home, and it had to postpone the Sayang Squad session twice due to safety precautions.

"When it finally happened, the wait was all worth it. It was very heart-warming to see all the smiles on our seniors' faces, especially those who are typically more quiet," he said.

NTUC Health nursing homes have also turned to dogs and other pet animals to engage their residents regularly and help improve their mobility.

Residents at the Jurong West, Geylang East and Chai Chee homes get to do monthly exercises with Sayang Squad's therapy dogs, by walking the dogs with guidance and throwing tennis balls for the dogs to fetch.

Those at the Jurong Spring home get to speak to a parrot and interact with two parakeets and a quail -

WHAT DOGS BRING

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MS RYANN CHONG, co-founder of Sayang Squad.

which remain in their cages – once or twice a month.

Later in 2023, those in the Jurong West and Chai Chee nursing homes can also look forward to playing with cats in monthly sessions organised by art-jamming cat cafe Wildflower Studio.

Ms Ryann Chong, a co-founder of Sayang Squad, who is in her 40s, said: "Dogs have this magic that we will never understand. They are not judgmental and give unconditional love."

Singapore Christian Home resident Madam Teo, 70, recounted how she had a family dog she loved. "My dog was like a human. I love dogs – they are humans' best friends."

Madam Kong said in Mandarin: "The (Sayang Squad) dogs are really cute. I love to hold them. I hope they can come in a few more times."

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