

Francis, Special Member Of Canines For Christ

By Karen McBride

Francis' life was drastically different in 2004. The Shepherd-Rottweiler mix was found shivering under a bush by Bill Pielli and taken to the Pinellas Humane Society. Bill contacted his friend, Leslie Boerst, who had recently lost her husband, and all three of her dogs within a year. She was in Minnesota, caring for her parents, but as soon as she returned to Florida, she adopted Francis. He was only 21 lbs, but she nursed him back to health and, eventually, trained him as an American Kennel Club (AKC) therapy dog.

As a member of Van Dyke Church, Boerst learned about Canines for Christ. She took Francis to meet Larry Randolph, who started the dog therapy ministry four years ago. Just as their mission statement reads, Randolph felt God wanted him

to "use ordinary people and their dogs to share God's message of love, hope, kindness and compassion to the community." At the time, he didn't own a dog, and borrowed his daughter's dog to start the ministry.

Randolph now owns a 3-year old white lab, donated by a breeder, who requested that he call her Gracie. The dogs and their owners visit hospitals, cancer centers, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and adult care centers. The list of places the teams visit include Brighton Gardens, Carrollwood Care Center, St. Joseph's Hospital, James A. Haley Veterans Hospital, Ronald McDonald House, Pyramid and Manorcare to name a few. Prayers and spiritual guidance are offered and patients look forward to the canine visitors. Dogs must be two years old to enter the ministry. They must pass a Good Citizenship test developed by the AKC. In addition, they must be sociable,

well-mannered and non-aggressive.

As a volunteer, you are required to have a Pet Health Certificate completed by your veterinarian, go through a screening by a representative of Canines for Christ, agree to wear the t-shirt, ID tags and the dog needs to wear the vest and patch, hand out the card with your dog's picture and message of God's plan of salvation, and of course, talk and listen to the patients and share God's message of hope and love.

For more information, go to www.k9forchrist.org or call 968-3983.

Francis enjoys his bi-monthly Wednesday night visits to Suncoast Kid's Place, an organization that provides support to children, teens and their families, who have lost



Leslie and Francis

loved ones. Education and peer support groups are offered to help people going through the grieving process. When Francis first began his visits, he spent time with middle school children. He would seek out the shy, quiet kids, and lay his head on their lap. Within a few



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minutes, they were petting his head. With his gentle demeanor, he is a good candidate to work with the younger children (kindergarten through second grade), and will begin working with this age group soon. For more information about Suncoast Kid's Place, go to <http://www.suncoastkidsplace.org> or call 990-0216.

A few years ago, Francis suffered from hip dysplasia, which caused his knee to snap. It took several surgeries to help him to walk again. This experience, plus the fact that he is getting older, caused the canine to be plagued with arthritis and pain in his hips. His owner wanted to find alternative options to help her beloved dog. Boerst found

the Veterinary Rehabilitation & Wellness Center in Odessa, Dr. Valerie Fucci, DVM. Francis' therapy began with steps up over poles, then the balancing ball to promote balance and strength. Soon he began the underwater treadmill. Thanks to these amazing techniques, and his owner's devotion, Francis is able to run again and continue with his visits to Suncoast Kid's Place giving love and comfort to the people he meets.

For more information about adopting a dog in our area contact Pasco County Animal Services, 813-929-1212, or visit Tuesday through Saturday, 12-4:30, with extended hours on Thursday, until 6:30 pm at 19640 Dogpatch Lane, Land O' Lakes.



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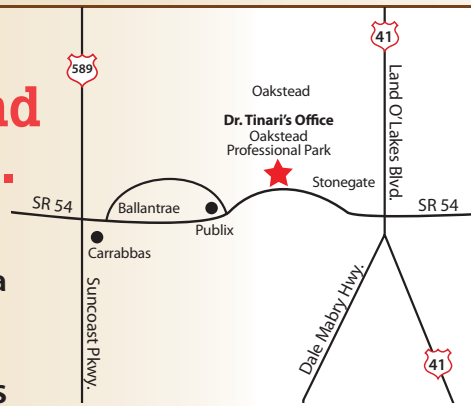


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