

# 2017 Planetree Therapy Animal Award Nominee



## Mango

**Mango's** story written by his teammate, **Brooke Terpening**

**How long has the team been volunteering?**

Mango has been my therapy dog partner at Longmont United Hospital (LUH) in the TAILS (Therapy Animals in Loving Service) program since 2013. Prior to that, we volunteered for approximately two years at a hospital in Loveland, an Imagine! Group home in Longmont, and an assisted living facility in Boulder.

**Does the therapy team have any special talents? Can they do tricks? Play the drums? Knit a sweater? Tell us, we are all furry ears...**

When Mango first meets people, I ask him to "Say hello." People are amazed and amused that he walks directly to them and greets them, waiting for their touch. When it is time to say goodbye, Mango will solemnly sit and offer a paw. When a bed-ridden patient can't reach to pet him, I will place a folding chair next to the bed, ask Mango to hop onto the chair, and soon patient and dog are happily giving each other therapy. At the Homestead Adult Day Center, Mango plays "hide and seek" with a special ball that the clients keep just for him. They don't often fool Mango – even when they hide his ball in one of the pockets of their pool table! Mango's secret talent for wearing costumes comes out at Halloween when he sports a snazzy witch hat and orange ruffle or, at Easter, rabbit ears. When Mango appeared as "Mr. December" in the hospital's TAILS calendar, of course he posed in a Santa hat!

**What department(s) does the animal therapy team work in?**

Fourth floor (Orthopedics and Transitional Care), special request visits on other floors, and waiting rooms that aren't covered on visit days; at the Homestead Adult Day Center; at the University of Colorado therapy dog events

**What makes this animal therapy team so special?**

All therapy animals are special because they are non-judgmental and loving, but Mango's special gift is his empathy with people. Perhaps Mango is extra-sensitive to people's pain because he has struggled with hereditary copper hepatopathy (Wilson's disease in humans) and inflammatory bowel disease all his life. When he makes eye contact with a person, they are drawn to him, a silent communication - a mutual understanding - seemingly established. People open up immediately and begin telling him all about their day, their family, or their own beloved pets, drawing comfort from the simple act of holding or talking to him. I realized that Mango was destined to be a therapy dog when I took him out to restaurants, where he would calmly sit next to our outside table. Often I would turn around to see a person sitting on the curb talking to him, his paw on their lap and his ears cocked attentively to whatever the person was saying.

**Give us an example of how the animal therapy team has enhanced the experience of a healthcare setting for a patient, family member or staff**

Mango and I usually visit LUH on Saturday afternoons, and each encounter is unique. Some are brief; others are filled with laughter; some are tearful, as patients remember long-lost but still-loved pets. There are lonely patients and those who get a brief respite from their pain.

Some visits are especially moving. One such experience occurred during our annual TAILS team evaluation with our evaluator, Gail Elias. That day I knocked on a partially closed door and saw a young woman in bed eating a meal. A meal tray, dishes, coloring books, pencils, and notebooks lay scattered across her bed. A visitor sat quietly in a corner. I expected them to decline the visit but, to my surprise, the patient dropped her fork and exclaimed that she needed to see a dog.

We sanitized and entered the room. The young woman smiled and began to excitedly clear off her bed so she could reach over to pet Mango. She asked if he could get on the bed with her. I was fortunate to have Gail with me, who helped clear the bed while I got a sheet for Mango from the nurse's station.

I gently lifted Mango onto the bed, and the young woman wrapped her arms around him. Mango snuggled closer into her, lay down, and put his head across her lap. The young woman didn't speak for several minutes as she held Mango and stroked him. She then started softly speaking to him (and us as well, I suppose). She explained to him that she missed her dog, but she couldn't have a dog in hospice care. She told him that she wished she could have a pet there because, unlike others in long-term hospice, she was still in a wheel chair and could take him out. She rocked Mango gently in the dimly lit room while her visitor looked on with a small smile on her face. The visitor, the young woman explained, was her roommate in hospice.

The young woman's eyes glistened (as did Gail's and mine) when she repeatedly said that this visit was just what she needed. She continued holding Mango while a nurse administered pain medication through her port. She buried her face in Mango's fur and hugged him hard. We promised to put her room in the book for more visits. As the medicine lulled her, I quietly moved Mango to the floor and out the door. I believe Mango would have stayed with her for the rest of the day if he could have.

Yes, there are scientific studies showing that petting a dog or cat will increase endorphins, reduce stress, and lower blood pressure. But, more than that, a therapy dog will look directly into your soul with loving eyes. Maybe, just maybe, the best medicine is medicine for the soul. And sometimes that medicine is nothing more than wrapping your arms around a dog.