

## **Archie? He's the Dog Star!**

The 165-pound Newfoundland works his magic daily with abused and neglected children at Camarillo's Casa Pacifica. Only his drool is 'yucky!'

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*Archie at Work*

The toddlers spot him the instant he steps out of his office. They swarm him like bees, shouting his name: "Archie! Archie! Archie!" He drops to the ground, eye-level with 3-year-olds. They lean into him, hug him, climb on him.

At Casa Pacifica, a Ventura County oasis for abused, neglected, and emotionally disturbed children, patience and calm aren't just virtues; they're job requirements. Archie has worked at the leafy campus in Camarillo for two years, and he doesn't flinch when small hands pull his ears and wandering fingers poke his nostrils. Instead, he bestows slobbery kisses with a pink tongue as large as a hand towel. "Yucky!" the kids squeal, hugging the 165-pound dog all the harder.

Archie was Vicki Murphy's idea. Her boss, Steven Elson, a psychologist and Casa Pacifica's executive director, was initially skeptical of so-called therapy dogs. Her husband was doubtful for different reasons; he knew where the massive canine, who

looks like an extra-fuzzy black bear but is actually a Newfoundland, would spend nights and weekends.

But Murphy, 51, Casa Pacifica's director of operations and development, had watched dogs work magic with children before. A former private school teacher, she once raised a puppy in her classroom. The second-graders took turns walking Rudy, a Labrador retriever, and learned not to rock their chairs on his paws or tail. If dogs could teach privileged children about responsibility and nurturing, Murphy mused, maybe they could help kids whose human role models had failed them utterly.

Besides, she'd said to her husband when they picked up the 9-week-old Archie, then a cubbish 26 pounds, "How big can he get?"

Private donors bought the dog and have kept him in kibbles — eight cups a day, or almost 30 pounds a week. Operated by a public-private partnership, Casa Pacifica looks more like an upscale camp than a shelter for youngsters who sometimes arrive with gashes and broken bones.

It has 45 beds for emergency placements: infants through 18-year-olds rescued from abusive or negligent households in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. They stay an average of two months before returning to their families or being placed with relatives or in foster homes.

The campus also has a school and a 28-bed residential treatment center for seriously emotionally disturbed 11- to 18-year-olds who have exhausted the foster care system. A typical stay is about 15 months. Murphy chose a Newfoundland for Casa Pacifica after researching breeds. Newfies are gentle, playful, lovable galoots whose devotion to children has earned them accolades as natural baby-sitters. According to the American Kennel Club, "Sweetness of temperament is the hallmark of the Newfoundland." Their strengths made more of an impression on Murphy than other characteristics. Like their massive size. Or their tendency to drool.

Some children are initially frightened of Archie. They quickly get over it. "When we see really large creatures, we tend at first to be taken aback," said Howard Miller, a Casa Pacifica therapist. "But Archie is a very lovable looking and acting dog. Immediately the kids sense someone who is warm and cuddly. Being near him gives them a great sense of security."

Wired teenagers walk out their frustrations next to Archie. Lonely adolescents sit beside him on the green lawn, arms draped across his broad back. Kids who are having trouble in school practice reading aloud to him, choosing from a library of books about Newfies. A toddler who was 11 months old when she arrived at Casa Pacifica spoke her first word there: "Archie."

As for the drooling, Murphy and the other staffers have learned to live with what the kids call Archie's "schnarf." Murphy bought stacks of white cotton shop towels, and everyone from the receptionist to Elson keeps one nearby to wipe slobber off walls, desks and laps. A local quilting group has made 20 Newfoundland-size bibs, embroidered with Archie's name or phrases such as "World's Greatest Smoocher." He has a Valentine's bib and one for St. Patrick's Day. For the Casa Pacifica "prom," Archie wore a tuxedo bib with a boutonniere.

Dog people don't need proof that a wagging tail can salvage even the worst day. But researchers at UCLA Medical Center have actually quantified the therapeutic value. A study presented at the American Heart Assn.'s 2005 scientific conference monitored heart and lung function and stress hormones in 76 heart failure patients randomly assigned to one of three groups. In the group visited by a dog, anxiety levels dropped 24%, compared with a 10% drop in patients visited by a human volunteer and no drop in those with no visitor.

Today, UCLA's People-Animal Connection, or PAC, is one of the oldest and best-known animal-assisted therapy programs in the country. More than 60 trained volunteers and

their dogs visit 450 patients a month at the university's Westwood and Santa Monica hospitals.

"Patients have said these visits make them happier, less anxious and isolated, and less scared," said PAC director Jack Barron, whose golden retrievers, Joey and Sam, specialize in transplant and psychiatric patients, respectively.

Even doctors, nurses and other hospital staff members put in requests from time to time, not for a patient but for themselves, Barron said.

At Casa Pacifica, Archie starts each day by greeting everyone who works there. Unfolding from the back seat of Murphy's Chrysler in the morning (her husband was right about those nights and weekends), he pokes his big, square head into every office before posting himself at the door to await the children.

When he isn't napping in Murphy's office, he snores next to the director's desk. Casa Pacifica's Christmas card last year featured a photo of Archie, a red scarf around his neck, a little girl at his side. Elson's reservations melted, even after Archie ran up some expensive medical bills. Like many large breeds, Newfies are prone to joint problems. Most recently, Archie blew out his hip playing with Tallulah, Murphy's Shih Tzu, a silken-haired dog about the size of a loaf of bread. Donations paid for the repairs. As Archie recovered, handmade get-well cards covered Casa Pacifica's walls and doors. The kids missed him. Home alone, the dog howled.

Murphy decided that work was the best medicine, and so Archie limped back to the office, his leg in a cast. And children who had known great callousness in their lives treated the giant canine with exquisite tenderness.

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