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photo by [R.E. Spears III](#)

Therapy Dogs: Ginger Owen sits with Dani and Ella during the dogs' December graduation ceremony from Therapy Dogs International. Among other things, the dogs visit patients at Sentara Obici Hospital.

Not your normal volunteers

By [Leila Roche](#) ([Contact](#)) | Suffolk News-Herald

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For a few days each month, a special group of community volunteers set aside their time to visit patients in the hospital and help children read.

But if you're looking for them above hip level you're looking in the wrong place.

These volunteers have four legs each and are certified by Therapy Dogs International.

Therapy Dogs International is a volunteer organization dedicated to regulating, testing and registration of therapy dogs and their volunteer handlers for the purpose of visiting nursing homes, hospitals, other institutions and wherever else therapy dogs are needed.

One of the primary ways that therapy dogs are used in the area is in visiting patients at Sentara Obici Hospital.

The hospital's Kanine Kandystripers program began in 2003 and now has 38 dogs active and certified.

Some might be surprised that dogs would be allowed into such a controlled setting as a hospital, but the training helps ensure that they are gentle and well behaved.

"Today, we went to Bennis United Methodist Church for a funeral," said Ginger Owen, whose Burmese mountain dog, Ella, is certified. "There were 18 dogs who walked down the aisle, went into a room and sat through the entire service, including military honors and the gun salute. They were perfectly well behaved. It allows them to do so many other things."

"It's almost like they have a sixth sense," Owen said. "We had a request from a family at the hospital the other day for a dog to visit an elderly woman who was ill and hadn't responded

to anyone. When we went in, Ella went and put her head on the bed. That's not something she ever does, but the woman lifted her hand and began to pet Ella, and she opened her eyes to see her. Her family said it was amazing. She hadn't done anything before, and Ella just knew."

Other opportunities for certified dogs include reading programs at libraries, schools and churches with children; going to career days and going to the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters.

"When we go to career days, it's very effective, because the children love the dogs," Owen said. "We're invited to do presentations at the Mutt Strut and a lot of other activities in Portsmouth and Chesapeake. Just about anytime there is a dog-related event, they call us up."

A current event Owen and Ella are participating in is Suffolk Humane Society's BARKS — Books and Reading for Kids in Suffolk — held once a month at Saint Paul's Episcopal Church.

"The kids are able to just sit and read to the dogs," Owen said. "There aren't any teachers sitting there correcting them. The dogs handlers are there if the child asks for help with something, but for the most part it's just them reading to the dog. It's unconditional when you read to a dog. They just sit and listen."

The dogs certified by the organization have been through testing and have displayed an even temperament and obedience.

A program about therapy dogs and testing of a new class of trainees will be held at the Suffolk Humane Society meeting at 6:30 p.m. July 21 at the Magnolia Ruritan Club building, 1047 Nansemond Parkway. The meeting is free and open to the public, but registration is required for dogs being tested.

"It's a great program," Owen said. "I know it's a crazy busy world, but if you don't stop to take time and do for others you can get caught up with all the things that make the world go 'round. When I take the time to visit, Ella allows me to be in a better place. It's wonderful to see these dogs at work."

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