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## Elkins therapy dog retires

By Brooke Binns  
The Inter-Mountain  
April 23, 2017

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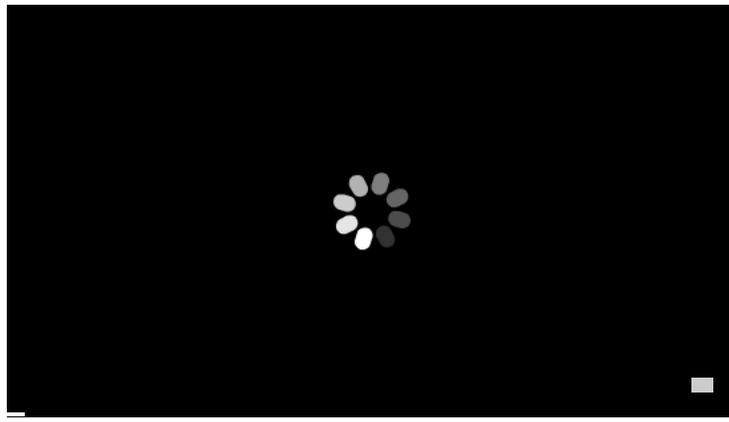
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ELKINS, W.Va. (AP) – After many years of bringing delight to residents at the Elkins Rehabilitation and Care Center, a well-loved pair has decided to retire.



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After working with patients for eight years, Linda Zimmer, expressive arts therapist at ERCC, and her emotional support dog Toby have gone into retirement.

Toby, Zimmer's toy poodle, is certified by Therapy Dogs International as an emotional support dog. Over their years at ERCC, both Toby and Zimmer created unique bonds with residents.

"Toby became everyone's dog – they thought of him as their dog," Zimmer said.

Zimmer said that oftentimes when she would visit ERCC, residents would recognize her as "the lady that brings Toby," because of the bond that the residents created with the emotional support dog.

"I think that the advantage is – in reading about other dogs that are TDI dogs in other parts of the country – I think what is special about Toby is that he was part of my practice.

"Ordinarily a dog will visit once a week, but he was there at ERCC with me 20 hours a week," Zimmer said.

During her time with ERCC, Zimmer worked with patients through a variety of mediums including poetry, puppetry and songwriting.

"The way I feel is that the residents have a reservoir of joy and creativity that I was able to tap into," Zimmer said. "They are such a rich resource, so I have to say that I learned a lot from them and they inspired me."

In addition, Zimmer introduced Music and Memory to the facility. Music and Memory is a non-profit organization that strives to bring personalized music into the lives of the elderly, or those who are not mentally or physically strong, through digital music technology.

"I felt really lucky to be able to establish the arts programming there because it's fairly innovative in nursing homes at this point," she said.

Zimmer explained that she would often write songs with residents as a form of therapy. Knowing how popular Toby was among residents, the therapist explained that she once worked together with them to create a song about the toy poodle.

"Toby had his own song. We wrote a parody to 'The Ballad of Davey Crockett,' so everybody knew the song," Zimmer said. "We would incorporate his different age into the song every year when he had a birthday."

Zimmer added that in the future she will be presenting workshops on projects that she developed while at ERCC, and hopes to complete a book that will share ideas with people who do similar work.