



# Wagging Tails

IRISH THERAPY DOGS NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2009

## Our First Year

**I**rish Therapy Dogs celebrated its first birthday at our sponsored walk on Sept 13th.

Looking back, it has been a year of tremendous achievement. The number of our Visiting Teams has risen to 90, located in virtually all counties with 50 more awaiting assessment and final processing. Co-ordinators and assessors have been established in Cork, West Cork, Sligo, Limerick and Galway. Our busy office has been set up and management systems put in place. As well as donations from supporters and sponsors, we have also had many fund raising activities including flag days and collections at several venues, sponsored walks, mini marathon sponsorship, charity sales. We had stands at the

RDS, at both the European Winner Dog Show in May and Pet Expo in October. Our bright and colourful stands attracted a lot of people resulting in many enquiries and applications to volunteer with us (Noel Carbery's story on page 2 is very typical). To round off the year, there was a large attendance at the annual pet blessing in St. Joseph's Church, Glashule in October. All these achievements are due to a lot of hard work, dedication and commitment by all our volunteers in all areas who freely gave of their time to help at all these events and for this we are very grateful. And the future? We plan to complete the establishment of our organisation on a countrywide basis with co-ordinators



and assessors strategically located to provide our service nationally. This will also include our Junior Section. We place a high priority on developing our network to ensure that all our members are valued and encouraged to participate in all activities of Irish Therapy Dogs. The strength of the organisation is its people.

## Phobia

**D**ogs? I hated them! For as long as I can remember, I had a fear of them. Not just anxiety in their presence but a real life limiting fear. I would not leave the house if there was a dog outside. I would cross the road to avoid one. Panic set in if one came anywhere near me.



*Company of dogs ! Aileen (extreme right, back to camera) takes part in the sponsored walk unconcerned by all the dogs around her. This would have been impossible a few years ago*

*We welcome Anne Dolan and Magdalena Hytros who have joined the rest of our voluntary administration team. Their commitment is greatly appreciated.*

That all changed when I was introduced to Irish Therapy Dog Willow who visits St. Oliver's ward at St. Mary's Centre where I work. Willows beautiful temperament, lovely expression and friendly disposition gradually worked their charms and slowly but surely I

learned to approach and touch her and eventually hug her! I will even mind her when her owner is busy with Irish Therapy Dogs business. But that didn't mean all other dogs were regarded the same way! However, as I came into contact with more and more therapy dogs my fears slowly evaporated to a point where I had no problem in taking part in the sponsored walk where I was surrounded by dogs. Completely cured? Not quite. I am still terrified of barking or aggressive behaviour in dogs but the change in my life brought about by therapy dogs has given me a greater freedom.

*Aileen Aver*

## Our First Visit

I first encountered Irish Therapy Dogs when my family and I attended the European Winners Dog show at the RDS at the end of May 2009.

It was my son Ian aged 10, who showed an interest in finding out more about the work that they do. After meeting members at the stand I decided to apply to become a visiting team with my Bichon, Paris. Ian was delighted to hear that junior volunteers were welcome too. Paris and myself were assessed and passed with flying colours. So our journey began, now all we needed was a care centre to visit!!

Finally in September we got the call that we had been allocated to TLC Care Centre in Saggart.

At last the day had arrived for our first visit as an Irish Therapy Dogs visiting team (Ian, Paris and I). We were a little apprehensive about the first visit and many questions went through our heads. We were unsure about what to expect, would the people like us and how would we be accepted. Paris was the most relaxed amongst us. She is a placid dog and just takes everything in her stride.

For our first visit we were accompanied by a volunteer experienced in visiting. It was great to have her there because she knows the ropes so well and would certainly make sure we were at ease and relaxed. When we arrived we were welcomed by Irene who coordinates the various activities for the care centre. She was so friendly and took to Paris straight away, as did Paris to her. From that point we felt totally at ease. We were introduced to other members of the staff including the Director of Nursing. What was really noticeable was the genuine warmth which the staff showed towards us. They were so excited about the visiting team and the weekly visits which would take place.

Irene then gave us a guided tour of the care centre and the various common areas where residents sit and socialise.



*Noel and his son, junior volunteer Ian with Paris*

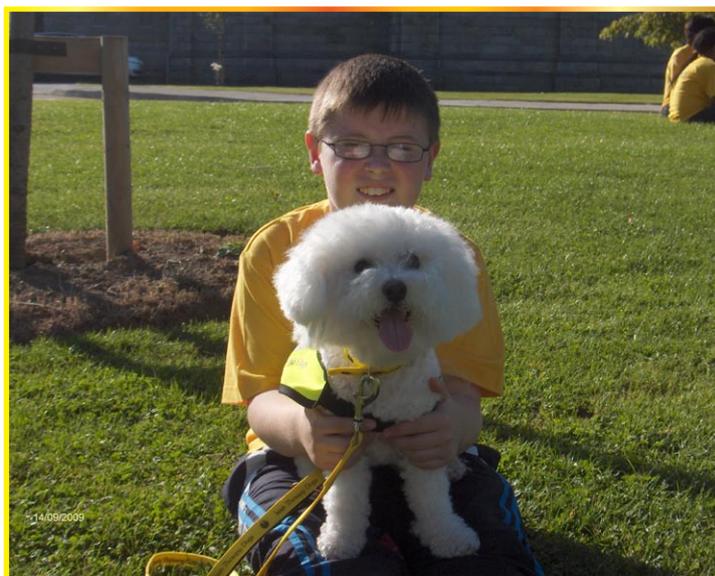
We started to meet some wonderful people. The reaction was amazing and it was so heart warming to see their eyes light up and smiles come to their faces when we brought Paris over to them. Paris was really enjoying all the attention and was very willing and content to sit on people's laps. It was great to see the residents' respond by stroking her. The conversation flowed freely with residents talking about the dogs they had in the past and the love and companionship they bring to people.

As we made our way through the care centre one particular instance stood out. As we passed a gentleman who was wheelchair bound we stopped to have a chat. We were told that this gentleman did not interact very much. As we talked, we put

Paris sitting on his lap. With that the gentleman gave the most wonderful smile and started to stroke Paris. By the time we had left the gentleman he was still smiling and saying Paris's name. It was at that point that the true meaning of been a visiting team was realised. All the apprehension we had previously disappeared in that one moment. And after what seemed like a short time but was in fact nearly an hour our first visit came to an end. As we said goodbye to residents and staff we were already beginning to look forward to our next visit.

We have now been visiting TLC Care Centre for several months. Tuesday nights are now a night when I gladly rush home from work to be greeted by Ian who has brushed and decked Paris out in her Irish Therapy Dogs outfit and is waiting patiently to go on the visit. We are always welcomed by the staff on our arrival. The residents now look forward to our visit and with each visit there comes a different experience. We are constantly being introduced to new residents and their families who have heard about the visiting team. It is almost as if we have become part of the furniture but more importantly we have become one of the family in TLC.

*Noel Carbery*



*Junior volunteer Ian is very proud of his Dad's therapy dog Paris*

# Tigger

**T**igger is our four years old family pet. Her mum Lucy lives with us also. Lucy had 9 pups and Tigger was the smallest of the litter. When she was born she was not much bigger than a mouse and my son Stephen fed her separately as the other pups were much stronger.

Tigger and I live in Drumcliffe Co Sligo and we are members of the Sligo branch of Irish Therapy Dogs almost since its inception over a year ago. We visit St Cecilia's School near Rosses Point in Co Sligo. This school caters for students with moderate, severe and profound learning disabilities. We visit the Junior Classes every Thursday afternoon.

As soon as Tigger sees my yellow sweatshirt she knows it's time to go to "work". She gets very excited and she runs to my car and sits there patiently waiting for me to finish my lunch.

The pupils look forward to Tigger's weekly visit. Some like when she sits on the couch beside them and they like

to stroke her, others come for walks with Tigger and me around the corridors or when the weather allows we walk in the playground.

Others then like to watch us from a distance. I remember our first visit in October 2008. One child in particular would cover his eyes with his arm when we entered the room but as the weeks went by he seemed to be taking more notice of us. Then after the Christmas holidays he seemed to be getting nearer and nearer to us, just for a few seconds but there was still no contact with Tigger. A few weeks later he took my hand and he now had made contact with Tigger but through me – he was a very happy boy that day (not to mention how happy I was ). After the Easter holidays he sat on the couch beside me, he was to my right and Tigger to my left – still no contact. The following week he placed his



*Tigger can't wait to get going on her visits*

hand just above Tigger's head --- still no contact. The next Thursday as I walked in to the school I thought to myself maybe this will be the day. And it was. He came to us straight away sat on the couch next to Tigger, put his

hand on her head for a fleeting moment and then smiled at everyone and ran across the room! His teacher and I and his Special Needs Assistant were very excited.

By this time I was aware the school year was coming to an end. I had great hopes that he would now be confident and relaxed enough to sit with Tigger and I on the couch --- and he did just that! With just two Thursdays left before holidays, I was so happy with what we had achieved. Then he exceeded all my expectations when he held the lead with me and we walked around the playground, all three of us.

What an emotional and very exciting moment for all of us. Tigger was so proud too --- as anybody who owns a dog will know, its all in the eyes.

And now I look forward to the new school year and wait in anticipation to all the friends I have yet to meet. And Tigger can't wait either.

*Edel Conway*



*Tigger's gentle temperament works wonders*



**Éilis Dillon, Principal, St. Cecilia's School, Cregg, Co. Sligo adds to Edels charming story.**

In St. Cecilia's School we began working with pet therapy just over a year ago. It is early days yet but the students look forward each week to our visit from Tigger and Edel. Some of the students were terribly afraid of Tigger when she first came but week by week they have grown fond of her and have begun to reach out and touch her and go for walks with her. The routine is the same each week which is important to help

our students stay focussed and calm. We have found that the playground is the best venue for both Tigger and the students. There is enough room for all to share!

Currently the activities include looking at Tigger, stroking Tigger, being gentle with Tigger, walking with Tigger and talking to Tigger. Skills such as communication, turn taking, waiting, gentleness and walking are all being developed by the students through a rewarding activity.

We would like to thank Edel for her

professionalism and willingness to engage with us in the best interest of the students. Her enthusiasm is wonderful. Edel and other volunteers of Irish Therapy Dogs are providing a great service and we are very grateful and appreciative.

Please keep up the good work

*Éilis Dillon  
Principal St. Cecilia's School  
Cregg, Sligo*

## My Assessment

I had for some time considered volunteering some of my time for a worthy cause. However, like many people I just never got around to it or hadn't found the right cause, that is until earlier this year.

Then I found Irish Therapy Dogs, by chance through the RTE show, called Nationwide. I was enthralled with the concept and as the fond owner of a "softy" Golden Retriever called Honey it was immediately apparent to me that this was worth exploring.

After logging on to the website and reading further about the cause I decided to send an e-mail expressing my interest to become a volunteer. A couple of days passed and I received a phone call explaining what was involved, the type of commitment needed, stages of becoming a member following on from which I was sent the necessary paperwork to be completed. These included an application form, a Garda vetting form and two references forms.

A number of weeks passed after which I was invited to bring Honey for both of us to be assessed as a prospective visiting team. The assessment was interview like in style and I was

impressed with level of professionalism. The assessment panel asked me a number of questions about myself and Honey to ascertain whether we were right for the role and also that the role was right for us. Then it was time for Honey to be put through her paces. Although I was quietly confident she'd pass with honours I must admit I had my fingers crossed! Firstly there was the obedience test, the standard things like stay, sit, and shake hands. They then introduced her to a wheelchair, and other walking aids to ensure she had no adverse reactions. Thankfully she is well accustomed to children's buggies so these posed no issues. The meeting came to an end and the assessors said they would be in contact in six to eight weeks after the Garda vetting result was processed.

Seven weeks later I got word by post to say we were accepted and we then arranged to meet again to get fitted out in our uniforms and agree the date for the first visit to my local nursing home, Windfield, Dunboyne Co Meath.

A volunteer experienced in visiting came with me on the first visit for extra support and to help me get accus-



Damien and Honey

tomed to the protocols. I was really surprised with the level of support the staff offered and how they spoilt Honey with praise to help her settle. We then met the residents and all I can say is that I feel it is something everyone should experience for themselves as it is the most rewarding thing I've done in a long long time! I look forward to our weekly visits as much as the residents look forward to us arriving.

*Damien Gear*

## Spanish Visitor

In September, Irish Therapy Dogs had a visit from Diana Garcia from Malaga in Spain.

Diana hopes to set up a therapy dog group in Malaga and came to learn from Irish Therapy Dogs how to set up, organise and run a fully professional service. She had very full discussions with Irish Therapy Dogs committee

members, accompanied a visiting team on a visit and attended the Dublin sponsored walk where Diana met many more visiting teams and established useful contacts. We wish her success in her project and will follow developments with interest.

**"For me a house or an apartment becomes a home when you add one set of four legs, a happy tail, and that indescribable measure of love that we call a dog."**

*– Roger Caras  
President Emeritus, ASPCA*

*A visitor to a patient came out to me later yesterday after visiting with my therapy dog and simply said "Thank you – that was the first time I saw my mother smile today". How could one not be rewarded and motivated by words like that!*

*As told by one of our volunteer visitors*

## Juniors

My name is Edel Blake and this is my dog Lady. We work as a visiting team in Fingal House Nursing Home, Swords. I am delighted to be helping with the Juniors. We are going to have a lot of fun and do lots of different things like competitions, games, stories... Can't wait to get started!

