

## Devoted Dogs

Of my twenty-two dogs, all are loving, loyal and devoted to my husband and me. There isn't an aloof, detached, unfriendly or undemonstrative one among them. Their tails wag enthusiastically at the mere sight of us, and they lick and hug us profusely. They are always happy to see us and are overjoyed to spend time with us each and everyday. They love to go for their walks and can't contain their excitement when they know a ride in the car is imminent. When we take the time and make the effort to play with them, they can hardly control their exuberance.

We, who love our animal companions, do not take for granted their unconditional love, but rather embrace them as they embrace us. Many of us regard our animal companions not only as our best and most trusted and valued friends, but also as beloved family members. There are countless stories about dogs who save humans from tragedy or even death - a Rottweiler leaping into a burning apartment to save an infant; a German Shepherd saving a woman choking on a piece of fruit; a Labrador Retriever dog plunging into a swiftly flowing river to pluck out a drowning child. Many people who have been rescued from dangerous or deadly situations regard their dogs as "guardian angels." And, perhaps, they are indeed. Who am I to determine their role or purpose? However, I can certainly personally attest to their healing powers and their seemingly "divine" intervention", or shall I say, "contribution" to human lives. I have witnessed their abilities firsthand many, many times throughout my life.

One of the most joyous and fulfilling activities in which I have participated is to train and have some of my dogs classified as Canine Good Citizens through the AKC (American Kennel Club) and then, after further training, to have them certified as "Assisted Animal Therapy dogs. They are thus able to accompany me to various hospitals, assisted living centers, hospice care facilities, schools and recreation centers where they bring joy and healing to patients, residents and students and to both children and adults alike. They bring peace, unconditional love and comfort to those in need. They often work with people with special needs such as cerebral palsy, Down's Syndrome, epilepsy, autism, and so on.

These dogs are devoted to me and to serving those in need. They do not seem to "see" wheelchairs, walkers, IV's or other medical apparatus. They appear "at home" and at ease with those who are ill or disabled. Depending upon the frequency of visits they make, they truly come to know and love those they serve. They perform "tricks" for and play with them. They enjoy being petted and held. They bring fun, laughter and friendship to so many who suffer and are lonely. They forge a unique bond with them. They are "real" and "genuine" and nonjudgmental. Those they visit seem to lose their embarrassment or self-consciousness during their time with our therapy dogs. For at least a short while, they forget their pain and commune with a creature that is loving and empathetic. These dogs are "all heart" and pure love. I am so grateful to be with them as they bring grace and dignity to those who have been displaced and too often simply forgotten.

