

Funeral home dogs provide solace for those in sorrow.

With a gentle nudge on a knee, or a solemn, big-eyed stare, dogs can provide an unobtrusive form of comfort quite unlike any other.

But it's not just our own pets who are attuned to our emotional needs. Research has long supported the benefits of trained therapy dogs interacting with everyone from cancer patients to traumatized children. Now the list of facilities where you can expect to see a therapy dog includes funeral homes.

More and more people are finding comfort in the presence of a wagging tail as they mourn—and grief-therapy dogs are becoming a valuable part of the team for those working in funeral homes across the nation.

"Anything that can help a person or family during a time of grief is a wonderful thing," says Mark Krause, president of the International Cemetery, Cremation, and Funeral Association (ICCFA).

Krause's colleague, and former ICCFA president, Paul Elvig, calls grief-therapy dogs a "wonderful, progressive idea." The ICCFA is so optimistic about the idea that it urges funeral directors who work with grief-therapy dogs to present their stories at its industry conferences.

Krause has a story of his own—his 5-year-old Portuguese Water Dog, Oliver, is one of the dogs breaking new ground as grief therapists.

Canine companionship was not high on Krause's list of priorities seven years ago. In addition to his role at the ICCFA, he is the owner of Krause Funeral Homes and Cremation Services in Milwaukee.



Oliver—at left with owner Mark Krause—works his magic at Krause Funeral Homes.

"My wife and daughter had lobbied long and hard for a dog," he says. "But at first, I didn't want one."

His resistance ended on Tuesday, September 11, 2001, as the United States came under terrorist attack.

"Oliver became a part of our family soon afterwards, and I wanted him trained as a therapy dog," Krause recalls. "Then, as I discovered dogs working in crisis-response teams, I knew that I wanted Oliver to work at the funeral home." After two years of training, Oliver started accompanying Krause to work.



PHOTOS COURTESY OWNERS



Belle provides comfort at Flintoft's Funeral Home.

COMFORTERS BY NATURE

Some dogs have come to this work without training. Belle, an 8-year-old Parson Russell Terrier, fell into her grief-counseling duties at Flintoft's Funeral Home in Issaquah, Washington, almost by accident.

"For four years I took Belle with me to the funeral home every day," says owner Tom Flintoft. "When I was with a family, she would wait for me patiently in my upstairs office, usually with other members of our staff."

But on one particular Saturday, with limited staff on duty, there was nobody to keep Belle company upstairs.

"She got tired of waiting," recalls Flintoft, "and I think she sensed she was needed downstairs. So she slowly made her way down and into a viewing room where a family had gathered."

To Flintoft's surprise, Belle was greeted with a warm welcome by the mourners. "A lot of Parson Russells have hyper, energetic personalities, but Belle is mellower than most of her breed," says Flintoft. "She can sense when someone needs comforting. She'll lie down at their feet."

Despite having no specific training,

therapy dogs," cautions Cindy Ehlers, founder and president of Animal Assisted Crisis Response. It is more crucial, she says, to assess a dog's personality and ability to comprehend and react to all kinds of social situations.

Ehlers began her own work with grief-therapy dogs when she founded HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response following a



Grief-therapy dog Zoey is part of the family business.

Your Dog, the Therapist

Your local kennel club may offer therapy-dog training classes (visit akc.org for a directory) or can refer you to a nearby therapy group. National organizations that can provide more information include Therapy Dogs International (www.tdi-dog.org) and the Delta Society (www.deltasociety.org).

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high-school shooting in Springfield, Oregon, in May 1998. As a result of that tragedy, Ehlers has developed programs that provide canine-assisted emotional support to children, teenagers, and adults whose lives have been affected by life changing events, crisis, and disasters, both natural and manmade.

Ehlers and her Keeshond, Tikva, received national recognition for their work in assisting mental-health workers at Ground Zero after 9/11. There, they brought support and comfort to firefighters, police officers, and other emergency responders working in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

"People grieve differently," says Ehlers. "Some people cry. Some express anger. Some want to mourn quietly, with no outside influences. A grief-therapy dog must be able to read people and act accordingly as the situation merits."

THE FUTURE OF FUNERAL HOME DOGS

Krause predicts a growing trend of grief-therapy dogs in family-owned funeral homes. (Corporate-owned facilities are less likely to employ the dogs, he says.) The ICCFA continues to spread the word at conferences, and several therapy-dog organizations now offer specific training for this type of work.

Kelly Dwyer—who runs Michigan Memorial Funeral Home with her husband, Daniel—was motivated to become part of a grief-therapy team when she heard about the work at an ICCFA conference. Her 2-year-old Golden Retriever, Zoey, recently received her certification as a grief-therapy dog from the Fur Angels Group. "Zoey and I have spent the past 18 months being trained and learning the ropes," says Dwyer. "We can't wait to begin."

Joseph Baneth Allen lives in Jacksonville, Florida, with his family and Bonnie, a Cocker Spaniel.