



Pat Bauer of Durand, center, led his Shetland pony, Charlie, through Dove Healthcare Nursing & Rehabilitation in Eau Claire in April. Certified nursing assistant Ashley Lauer went along for a ride. Bauer and Charlie have visited 59 nursing homes in the past 10 years.

Pet therapy

For 10 years, a retired dairy farmer and his Shetland pony have brought joy to nursing homes

DURAND — When Pat Bauer retired from dairy farming 11 years ago, he asked God what he should do next.

His answer came in the form of a 4-month-old black Shetland pony he bought for his granddaughter Shelby. She named the filly Charlie.

Pat's wife, Patty, was working as director of nursing at Oakview Care Center in Durand. She suggested Pat bring Charlie by so the nursing home residents could see the pony out in the yard.

She was in her office one day when she heard hooves clip-clopping down the hall.

"My stomach hit the floor," Patty said. "I just knew it was him."

Pat had led Charlie up

to the nursing home door, gave her a shove on the butt, and in she went.

After 10 years and more than 300 visits to 52 nursing homes, Pat and Charlie don't plan to stop making rounds anytime soon.

Pat, 75, said Charlie isn't nervous inside, and only once did she pee on a nursing home floor.

"It acts like a horse when it's in the pasture. When it gets inside it acts like a dog," Patty said.

Charlie, who will turn 10 on June 25, wasn't always so domesticated.

Pat bought her from a man dying of cancer. He didn't have time to socialize her.

Pat brought her home and led her around the yard with a rope.

He worked with Charlie on walking up and down stairs. She prefers going up.

"She likes elevators," Pat said.

In 2000, Pat and Charlie's nursing home visits were featured on KSTP-TV in the Twin Cities. The segment also aired on ABC's "Good Morning America." The exposure led to many invites from throughout western Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota.

Charlie's visits last for about an hour. Pat leads her into residents' rooms, where she gets nuzzled, kissed and fed snacks.

"Her favorite food in the nursing home is graham crackers," Patty said.

Lola Scott, director of recreational activities at Fairview Seminary Home in Red Wing, Minn., lets residents ride Charlie.

"You should see the thrill on the ladies' faces



Dove Healthcare resident Velma Berg greeted Charlie during the pony's April 16 visit to the nursing home. Charlie gets many kisses during her visits, Pat Bauer said.

when they get to go for a ride," she said.

Pat and Charlie go room to room, Scott said.

"One lady, she couldn't talk, but you could just see it in her face — the touch of the nose to the face just lit her up," she said.

Pat becomes mischievous during the visits.

"I never know what I'm going to do," he said. "I like to come up behind the nurses and scare 'em."

One of his favorite jokes is to let Charlie rest her head on a counter while he asks for a Leinie's beer.

"I'm pretty high when I get home at night. I'm happy as can be," Pat said.

In the small-town nurs-

ing homes Pat visits, many residents grew up on farms. Some recall doing fieldwork with horses.

"Residents say, 'I love that smell,'" Pat said.

Pat and Charlie make their rounds a couple of times a month during the winter. Pat hauls Charlie to two or three nursing homes a day to save on fuel costs.

When he stops for lunch, he offers pony rides for children in the parking lot.

Pat and Charlie also have visited schools and participated in Palm Sunday processions at churches.

Pat enjoys making the residents' day, and he said

they talk about his visit for days afterward.

"You try to give someone joy and you get more in return," he said.

Sociable Pat loves to have people around. He was the youngest of 11 children and he and Patty, who have been married for 40 years, have 12 children and 22 grandchildren.

"A stranger is a friend you haven't met yet," Pat said.

Patty quickly replied: "There aren't many strangers left in your world."

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Pat Bauer, right, and his brother Wilfred Bauer of Eau Galle let Dove Healthcare staff member Angela Blazel ride Charlie into the Eau Claire nursing home.



Charlie nuzzled Dove Healthcare resident Jim Lahner. The pony has stood still for 15 minutes at a time while residents with Parkinson's disease stand from their wheelchairs and hold onto the pony, Pat said.

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