

Wagging Tails, Touching Hearts - Gabriel's Angels

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For many dog owners, a dog is more than just a pet, but a part of the family. However, for abused, neglected and at-risk children across the Valley, a dog can be a teacher, a friend and even a savior.



Gabriel's angels is a nonprofit organization dedicated to breaking the cycle of violence for abused and neglected kids through its Pet Therapy Program, which teaches children empathy, self-esteem, trust, compassion, respect and nurturing behavior through interaction with dogs. The program is driven by the philosophy that the bond between a therapy dog and a child is strong enough to stop harmful behavior.

After 15 years in the corporate world, Pam Gaber, founder and C.E.O. of Gabriel's Angels, was tired, burnt out and missed her family. She resigned from her former job and began to volunteer every Friday at the Crisis Nursery in Phoenix where she told the children tales of her newly adopted Weimaraner puppy, Gabriel.

"I would tell the kids stories about Gabriel as a puppy and say 'Gabriel had his first bath this week,' and their eyes would light up and open wide," Gaber says. "I learned that through my storytelling these children were bonding with Gabriel."

Intrigued by the children's fascination with Gabriel, Gaber convinced the Crisis Nursery to allow Gabriel to attend the 1999 Christmas party dressed as Rudolph. Gabriel made his debut sporting antlers, a bell collar and a T-shirt reading, "Just call me Rudolph." What was intended as a surprise to make the kids smile quickly became something greater.

"I got him there and what happened in that next hour really changed my life, and I think the life of a lot of kids because he was able to reach children that as adults, we couldn't reach," Gaber says. "I knew this because I had been with these kids every Friday, and kids—little boys in particular - who were angry and violent - were none of [those things] with Gabriel. They were loving and kind and they would hug him."

By the spring of 2001, Gabriel's Angels had three pet therapy teams regularly visiting the Nursery. The next thing Gaber knew, Phoenix's Channel 3 news asked to compile a photo essay on Gabriel—an event that "catapulted" the organization to what it is today.

Within the past year, Gabriel's Angels has grown from three therapy teams to 120, providing service to over 100 agencies and over 12,000 children around the Valley, in facilities including Crisis Nursery, Salvation Army, Soujourner Center and My Sister's Place. Therapy teams encourage children to interact with animals in activities like grooming, listening to a dog's heart beat and bringing the dog water, which teaches children compassion and empathic behavior. The success has been noteworthy enough to earn a \$3,000 grant from the Planet Dog Foundation this past June.

For Gaber, this grant is a stepping stone to her main goal for the organization—to reach every child in need in Arizona. After that, Gaber dreams of going national.

"Here's the beauty: This program could go anywhere," Gaber says. "We could put it in L.A. tomorrow, we could put it in Boston tomorrow." Funding allows Gabriel's Angels to recruit, train and manage therapy teams with a highly trained staff. "The more funding we have, the more kids we can serve," Gaber says.

Gaber stresses that while money is important, the public's time is just as valuable. After all, the expansion and evolution essential to Gabriel's Angels comes from its dedicated volunteers.

"These kids live in turmoil and that special relationship between children and animals; that's why this program works," Gaber says.

Brings a whole new meaning to man's best friend.