



Photos by Tim Shortt, FLORIDA TODAY

**Dog has his day.** Handler Karen Hersing, a licensed clinical social worker, kneels with Dart, a Health First companion dog and the first dog to receive the Rainbow Award from the Brevard Association of Hu-

man Services. With Dart are some other therapy dogs: Sunny, Cubs and Gabe. For more photos of Tuesday's ceremony at Holmes Regional Medical Center, click on the gallery at [floridatoday.com](http://floridatoday.com).

# Therapy dog wins humanitarian honor

## Dart and other canine cronies take over hospital lobby

BY SUSAN JENKS  
FLORIDA TODAY

MELBOURNE — Despite his name, Dart seemed more mellow than spunky as he received an award for his health care service to the community Tuesday at Holmes Regional Medical Center.

About 15 of his canine buddies attended the event, briefly turning the lobby of the Melbourne hospital into an odd sight.

But, for 3-year-old Dart, the hospital's been part of his routine as a "facilitator dog" — a highly trained therapy dog — all his life, providing comfort to patients and families. He comes to the hospital several hours a day, four times a week, the only dog allowed to do so as part of Health First's therapy dog program.

"He makes patients feel spe-

cial, which is the magic of these animals," said Karen Hersing, Dart's human partner and a licensed social worker for Health First, which operates Holmes.

Although she won't own Dart outright until he retires, the two work together, often in the hospital's intensive care unit, to help patients struggling with serious illnesses.

Sometimes, patients are so entangled in tubes, they can barely move, Hersing said. Yet, they are able to reach out to touch the black Labrador/retriever mix or snuggle up with him on a chair or in bed. For a moment, "they feel like they're not in the hospital anymore," she said.

Dart's award came from the Brevard Association of Human Services, a volunteer organization that gives out its Rainbow



**Thrilled.** Dart, a 3-year-old Labrador/retriever mix, rests his head on his handler's lap after the ceremony.

Award each month to an individual or organization contributing to the betterment of health care in Brevard County.

Until now, it's always been given to humans.

But Dart's intuitive ability to sense patients' distress or pain, along with his advanced training, distinguishes him from other therapy dogs, said Richard Rossell, executive director of We Help Brevard, who presented the canine honoree with his plaque.

"We think he sometimes helps more than humans do."

Dart grew up in California as part of Canine Companions for Independence, a not-for-profit company in Santa Rosa that selectively breeds hundreds of dogs to be companions, then ships them across the country. Once they reach 18 months of age, the dogs begin more specific training to be facilitators, to help the hearing impaired or to assist adults and children with physical disabilities.

"It can be hard to give them up," conceded Nick Heldreth, a volunteer on the company's southeast regional board of directors. However, the impact on families is so profound, it's worth it, he said.

To train a dog like Dart  
See **DOG, 2B**

# Training costs \$50K

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## DOG, from 1B

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costs at least \$50,000, according to Heldreth, but he said the hospital does not pay for his services, which are covered by donations.

Moments before the award ceremony began, Father Bob Brukart, Holmes' chaplain, gazed out over the assembled pooches and thanked them for their unconditional love to patients and families not only at Holmes, but also at Palm Bay Hospital and area nursing homes. The dogs and their handlers must register with Health First and go through a certification process before going to work. The canines are observed and tested to make sure they have suitable temperaments.

In his remarks, the chaplain singled out Dart before praising the others, including the "Hounds of Hospice" — a motley canine crew of dachshunds, a shepherd/husky mix, two Chihuahuas and several yellow labs. Then, he delivered a blessing and sprinkled them all with water as some dogs yelped and others wagged their tails.

One dog, Simon, a wire-haired dachshund, squirmed in his owner's arms. A one-time show dog, Maddy Haft said, Simon's now a regular on the patient circuit instead, visiting patients near their Palm Bay home.

"I'm a volunteer and he's a volunteer," she said. ■

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