

# For a Change, a Shaggy Human Story

**R**OSIE the visiting dog enters the Village Nursing Home on Hudson and West 12th Streets softly, slowly, proudly. She may look like a black-and-white throw rug but she is not self-consciously cute. She does not scamper or bounce. It is a Saturday morning, and two dozen old people are slumped in wheelchairs watching cartoons on a giant TV, waiting to have their nails painted by an attendant. A few smoke or read. All seem crushed by time.

"Rosie's at her best with reluctant people," said Stephanie Calmenson, who is her owner but seems more like her younger sister. "She's not all over you. She gives people their space. She's not a licker. But she is a cheer-up dog."

Ms. Calmenson is the warmer, more outgoing of the two, the stroker, the pleaser. Ms. Calmenson reminds the old people about the grandchildren they mentioned last time, which makes them nod, and offers them Rosie, who makes them smile.

When Ms. Calmenson lifts her 21 pounds onto a lap, Rosie sits very still, allowing herself to be touched and rubbed while she figures out how much overt affection this person might want back. When an old man begins slamming his cane against a table and screaming at an old woman about rights to a chair, Rosie's head does not turn. She is working too hard at being a lap pillow for a woman who seems to have just come out of a semi-coma to reminisce about a dog named Flora who might have died 70 years ago.

•  
Rosie and Ms. Calmenson both listen carefully, although only one asks questions. Ms. Calmenson thinks that she and Rosie look alike, which is true; both have shaggy dark hair on their heads and lovely, large, amazingly humane brown eyes.

Ms. Calmenson grew up in Brooklyn in what she felt was a dog-deprived household.

She had dozens of stuffed dogs on her bed. She graduated from Midwood High School and Brooklyn College, intending to become a schoolteacher. While taking her master's in education at N.Y.U., she discovered writing. When her job as a kindergarten teacher was eliminated during a round of budget cuts in 1975, she got a job as secretary in a publishing company. She was an editor by the time she left in 1984 to write her own books, in her studio apartment near Gramercy Park. Now there were corners of her life that could be filled by a dog.

After much writerly research, discussion and a painful false start, she found herself drawn to the hairy, quirky Tibetan terriers she noticed at a dog show. They even had a back story: Tibetan terriers were supposedly holy dogs who guarded caravans with their karma and herded sheep while riding their backs. The 9-week-old puppy cost \$600. The breeder told Ms. Calmenson she had better have a sense of humor.

"Rosie was wild, even silly, as a puppy," said Ms. Calmenson, "which was a reason I sent her to puppy kindergarten. She was a lot of fun, but it is a small apartment. Even now that she's had so much training, she is not a dog who reacts by rote to authority. She would never make a seeing-eye dog, for example. There's a real streak of independence about her, which I love.

"You can tell her not to touch a piece of food right under her nose, especially if it's in some patient's plate. She will wait to be rescued if someone's squeezing her too tightly. But every day when we go out, even though she wants to go out, she doesn't run to the



Stephanie Calmenson

door when I pick up the leash. She walks away from me, in circles."

At about the same time she bought Rosie in 1988, Ms. Calmenson was volunteering with boarder babies at Bellevue; as Rosie progressed in her training, the idea of putting her together with people in institutions grew.

In a children's book published last year called "Rosie: A Visiting Dog's Story"

(ultimately, writers leave no story unturned) Ms. Calmenson describes and Justin Sutcliffe photographs Rosie's graduate studies with the visiting dog program of the ASPCA. Before she was 3 years old, Rosie was wearing the medallion of Therapy Dogs International and was a registered visiting dog of the Delta Society's Pet Partners Program. Rosie is a volunteer, but perks come with such certification; Rosie can travel on certain trains and planes that generally bar animals.

These days, Rosie and Ms. Calmenson go on formal visits no more than several times a month, usually to hospitals, nursing homes, schools for handicapped children; almost as much time is spent brushing her long hair and brushing her teeth.

But the mission of a visiting dog — could it also be an owner's calling? — has no formalized beginnings or endings. Even the two daily dog walks become visitations — that slow crawl around my neighborhood is really making rounds. Rosie snuggles between the feet of doormen, waits to be touched by a child scared of dogs, spreads smiles among people lonely in the sun, always connecting the unconnected, accepting love from those who need a place to play it.