

Senior Living

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COURTESY PHOTO

Virginia cuddles “Jasper,” a robotic dog designed to comfort elderly residents of memory care facilities.

Robotic pets are dementia patients’ best friends at Noble Senior Living

By Aimée O’Grady

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In this article, residents’ names have been changed to protect their identities.

On Tuesday, April 26, a small replica of a tan and white dog was removed from its box. Its “on” button was flipped before it was presented to four residents, each with a dementia diagnosis, who were enjoying the morning in the facility sunroom at the Noble Senior Living facility on Alexandria Pike in Warrenton.

Betty was the first to hold the robotic dog and she immediately react-

ed to its barking and wagging tail. She began to quietly sing and talk to the dog, and it was decided that the small dog was a male because of its blue bandana. When others in the room tried to get the dog’s attention, Betty said she didn’t want him to jump from her lap.

But she passed the dog to Julie, who had a similar reaction.

Sitting quietly in the corner of the room watching the other residents was Carol. When it was her turn to hold the dog, she brought her face toward it and rubbed her cheek against the soft fur. Carol then began to share memories from her childhood

with the other residents and guests. “We had mares and stallions, and I don’t know how many dogs and cats. I had to take care of all of them, while my husband went to work,” she said with a laugh.

New activities director Tracy Laclair wiped a tear from her eye when she heard Carol share those memories. “I have never seen her engage like that. She is hard of hearing. With her hearing and wearing masks she becomes easily frustrated and has reverted to not saying much.”

No one had heard the story of the mares and stallions until that moment.

Jim was the next one to hold the dog -- but not for long because Carol wanted him back. She moved the dog, which she named Jasper, to her walker and got up to take him for a walk.

While the response to the dog at Noble Senior Living is anecdotal, it is the reaction that Ellen Phipps, director of Aging Together and Kathi Walker, Rappahannock Rapidan Community Services Board ombudsman, were hoping to see. “What we have witnessed today supports the evidenced-based data,” Phipps said.

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