

Justin Levy

A few years ago, my brother was hospitalized, and he was visited by a therapy dog that raised his spirits and offered him companionship. Witnessing the positive effect of this experience, I was inspired to start training my own dog as a therapy dog.

Yogi is an energetic red labradoodle with irresistible charm, who always craved attention; he seemed like the perfect candidate. In order to prepare Yogi for his new career, I began obedience training to work on channeling his spirited disposition, which included daily drills and studying techniques online.

Once I felt confident in his abilities, I registered for the AKC Canine Good Citizen test, a certification process for therapy dogs. On his first attempt, Yogi did not pass. I was undeterred and continued training with unwavering determination. Despite a second unsuccessful attempt, I made one last effort before realizing that Yogi's exuberant energy might not be suitable for therapy work. His liveliness, while endearing, could foreseeably pose a challenge for individuals with delicate conditions.

I had to accept a new path better suited for Yogi's infectious charm. I reached out to Sunrise Senior Living, a local community for the elderly, proposing I bring Yogi to spend an hour with the residents, hoping to brighten their days. The staff at Sunrise enthusiastically welcomed the idea, without requiring certification. A bond immediately formed as the seniors connected with Yogi. Their faces lit up as they stroked Yogi's fur, sharing stories about their beloved pets from years gone by. Yogi became the center of attention, promoting social interaction among the residents.

A particular visit through the memory ward left me awestruck. A nurse shared that Yogi evoked a distant memory in a patient struggling with Alzheimer's. This encounter solidified my commitment to Yogi's future visits. The seniors eagerly welcomed his arrival, expressing their anticipation for our next gathering.

Every visit, I witnessed the residents' genuine delight, and I realized the profound impact Yogi and I were making. I shared my love for animals and offered companionship to those who may not have the opportunity of having pets in their lives.