The Micracle of Animal Assisted Therapy *in Malaysia*

By: Helena Hon and Joan Fam

Humans have an intrinsic and biological imperative to commune with nature, receive attention and make connection. The mere presence of an animal - even a visiting animal – lifts the spirit, brings a smile and breaks the ice in social situations, eradicating isolation and loneliness, and thereby motivating 'natural' healing. This profound effect that animals have on humans is what Animal Assisted Therapy is all about. Today, AAT is used worldwide for its therapeutic influence of human beings.

Animal Blessing Prayer
"To the service and therapy animals that enrich our lives with unconditional love; may you be blessed with a long life, good health, and a happy home. May we treat the animals entrusted to our care with compassion, understanding, gentle hands and open hearts, extending to them the same love they extend so selflessly to us. May we acknowledge their presence as a blessing in our lives, so that the mutual bond that exists between us is never taken for granted."

Animals re-engage people with life, it has been said. And no where is this truer than in the hundreds and thousands of cases throughout history where Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has proven to have positive results on the elderly, the young, the sick, the lost and the physically and mentally challenged. Whether it be bringing hope to the depressed, peace to the anxious, a smile to the elderly or calm to a frustrated child, AAT has shown that animals, especially pets, are therapeutic in that they enrich people's lives in so many ways and on so many levels.

This World Animal Day, commemorated in the month of October, we highlight and applaud the individuals and the animals that have made AAT possible in Malaysia, and take the opportunity to celebrate, acknowledge and show thanks for their work, particularly that of our four-legged friends who, through their unconditional positive regard, keen response and interaction and absolute devotion to human beings, have served us, supported us, helped us, been our companions, and brought wonder, meaning and purpose into our lives.

Building Character and Self Esteem through the Ti-Ratana Dog Training Programme

Ti-Ratana has given these boys a home, and now with their dogs whom they personally undertake to train and love, they have found a purpose and a direction in life.

Shawn Lim, one of a group of dog trainers who has been volunteering his time, effort, commitment, sweat and knowledge training the children of Ti-Ratana Welfare Society to train their dogs for the past one year, says in retrospect, that the dog training endeavour, started off by Wellington Ho – another well-known dog trainer - as a bid to save the lives of 45 pound dogs on death row, has paid off handsomely thus far. "The unwanted dogs were taught skills and made adoptable and the children who were taught to train them learnt discipline, confidence and were given a sense of achievement and purpose in life," he says. As a result, it has been a win-win situation for all parties.

How It All Began

What precipitated the whole Ti-Ratana dog training project was a dramatic turn of events back in July 2006 when a desperate midnight SMS sent out to plead for the saving of some 45 dogs facing euthanasia at the Puchong Pound, brought on a rescue of unprecedented proportions. On D-Day, all 45 dogs, perhaps more, with many of them extremely feral, aggressive, dirty and scared were loaded onto a lorry and driven off in a wake of dust. The problem was – there was no place to go; that is, until Ti-Ratana Orphanage, a part of a huge welfare centre comprising a Children's Home, an Old Folks' Home and a Women's Shelter in Desa Petaling, stepped forward to help. Now, Ti-Ratana is a non-profit, non-partisan, and non-denominational community service society set up in the spirit of compassion to serve and provide shelter, education and care for the underprivileged members of society. The offer for the dogs, in the same spirit of compassion, was to give them a home until adoption could be arranged.

But upon arrival at the sanctuary, the dogs were so stressed up they could not be approached. It was only when the children of Ti-Ratana came forward to help, did they miraculously calm down.

Magic Touch

And it was this 'magic touch', this affinity between the children and the dogs that started Wellington thinking. Could he capitalise on this affinity to help the dogs find a home? He had earlier read about the work of the Delta Society in the USA where inmates of a prison are put to help train unwanted dogs which otherwise would have been put to sleep. In the process, the prisoners learned the meaning of compassion and responsibility. "Since I had access to dog trainers who could help me teach the children about dog training," remembers Wellington, "I decided to organise basic Obedience Training for the rescued dogs so that they could be given "added value" and hence, attract people to adopt them."

The boys getting ready for their Friday evening training session.

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To this day, Dr S Sivagurunathan, Vice chairman of the Malaysian National Animal Welfare Foundation, continues to sponsor Hills Science Plan pet food to the Ti-Ratana dogs.

The next thing was to look for sponsorship of food and veterinary care for the dogs. "I gave Dr. Siva, a good friend of mine, a call explaining the purpose of the project, that is, using the children to help the dogs and, in return, the dogs would be able to help the children develop compassion and responsibility."

The Help of MNAWF

Dr. S. Sivagurunathan immediately picked up on the cue and in no time, confirmed that the Malaysian National Animal Welfare Foundation (MNAWF), of which he is the Vice chairman, would be organising the sponsorship of Hill's Science Plan pet food from Pets Corner Sdn Bhd as well as veterinary care from the Animal Medical Centre.

A three-month programme was put in place to give the dogs basic Obedience Training and an Open House was held at the end of the period. Many of the dogs were adopted based on the obedience demonstration which was impressively done by the children as witnessed by YAM Raja Datin Paduka Seri Zarina Raja Tan Sri Zainal, the patron of MNAWF (now also the patron of Ti-Ratana).

Animal Asisted Activity (AAA)

When the programme was first put in place, there were two objectives: to undertake animal rescue and to develop Animal Assisted Activity (AAA) as an ongoing programme at Ti-Ratana. However, the first objective was deemed to be too heavy a responsibility for the children but the objective of retaining AAA at the Orphanage was maintained through the use of a few of the original dogs and some fresh abandoned dogs.

Today, Wellington and company are still teaching dog Obedience Training to the children at the orphanage with Friday nights being dog training nights. The dog training instructors who have taken turns to serve with Wellington over the past three years include Munisamy Govindaraju, Lily Chong, Richard Ernest, Danny Valhoutte, Looi Siew Teip, Low Khai Shin and of course Shawn Lim.

The Animal Medical Centre provides medical care for the Ti-Ratana's dogs.

Doing a 'Sit-Stay' exercise with Wellington Ho (in white shirt), the initiator of the Dog Training programme and Shawn Lim (in green shirt), one of the trainers in the programme.

Ambalagan poses with his certificates and with Roy, his trusted dog. The team has done exceedingly well in many dog trials and aims to do even better in the next dog trail.

Sweet, well-mannered, "and the most matured of the lot" according to Shawn his trainer, Chiew Chee Hoo has won a trophy for training his "unwanted pound dog" to exceedingly high standards. This is an incredible team as the dog too has come out well from an abusive past.

Three Promising Star Students

"Recently, two of the children – Ambalagan A/L Maharan and Chiew Chee Hoo participated in a dog obedience competition with their rescued dogs. This was organized by the Malaysian Kennel Association (MKA). The children who competed against adults and veterans with their pedigree dogs, not only did remarkably well, they beat many of their older competitors and even scored placings in the top positions. They also received high commendation by the judge from Australia," says a proud Wellington.

Ambalagan, 14, was one of the first boys to ask Wellington if he could join the programme when it first started. So far, he has entered MKA's Obedience Trails four times, each time passing with results that showed better and better scores. "My dog Roy has given me an aim in life, and that is to go for competition and get good marks," smiles Ambalagan.

Chee Hoo, on the other hand, was never interested in dogs until a black dog he named Knight, came into his life on that fateful day in July 2006. The dog had been abused. When it first arrived, it had no hair at all because someone poured boiling water on it. Chee Hoo took care of the dog and learned to love it. In turn, the dog loved him back and together, they found solace in one another. When Chee Hoo heard about Wellington's programme, he volunteered and has never looked back since. To date, he has won a trophy for coming in fourth with a score of 90-

The current team of champion dog trainers in the making, with Chai Kok Wai on the extreme left, holding up their coveted trophies and certificates won at MKA's Obedience Trials.

In single file and with a purposeful stride, these boys, through their dogs, walk into the future with their heads held high.

over points as well as numerous pass certificates. "My dog has given me confidence and a sense of achievement," says Chee Hoo who will be turning 17 next year.

Both boys and a new "Star"-to-be by the name of Chai Kok Wai, 16, who asked to be recruited in the latest intake of the programme and who has shown incredible dedication, enthusiasm and promise since, have had the personal tutelage of Wellington and his dedicated team of voluntary training instructors.

Building Character and Self Esteem

Shawn is particularly heartened by the positive personality changes he has witnessed in the boys. "They are at a formative age," he says of them. "I may be training them to train their dogs but in the course of it, they are also taught leadership qualities – such as confidence and speaking up. In dog training, one must walk the dog in a confident manner, with the head held high and the shoulders back, and not shuffle around aimless with the head down and shoulders slumped. I used to see this in the boys but now I don't. I instil discipline, I make them wear proper training attire, and in order to be included in the programme they must commit to caring for the dog at all times, cleaning it, feeding it, playing with it and training it. I also always challenge them to think and to use their brains. 'Why is the dog not performing?', I always ask and I make them provide the answer. I never spoon feed. This way, they pick up problem solving skills which will serve them well in later life."

In the end, the goal of the Ti-Ratana dog training programme is two pronged: to give the dogs and the children a life-changing purpose; and for the children most definitely - to make a better person out of each and every one of them. And that, is AAA and AAT working at its best.