

Four-legged dental assistant keeps kids calmer



Dental hygienist Lesley Cesar with her goldendoodle dog, Samson, who helps calm anxious kids at Clarkston Smiles family dental practice. Photo by Kathleen Kozlowski Okray

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Lesley Cesar's sons aren't anxious about visiting the dentist — after all, their mom is a dental hygienist. But the single mom of two young men has sympathy for those who fear dental procedures.

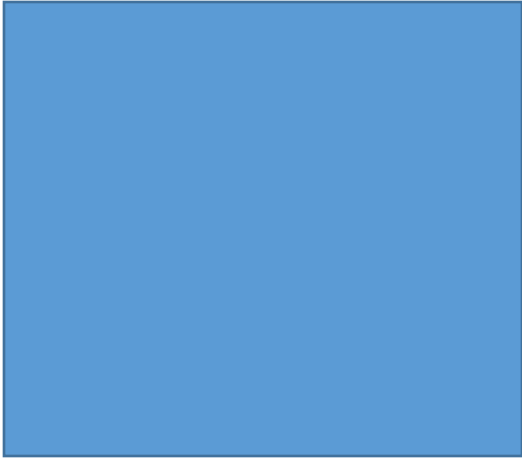
When she and her third, four-legged "son," Sampson, completed therapy dog training last spring, she decided to bring him to work to help fearful or anxious patients.

"I had heard of some dental practices bringing in a therapy dog, especially pediatric practices," she says. "It has helped get people back in the chair after they have experienced some type of trauma or developed a fear."

Cesar easily convinced her co-workers at Clarkston Smiles family dental practice on Main Street in Clarkston to give her 7-year-old goldendoodle a try. His breed simplified the one issue: "He doesn't shed, and is hypoallergenic," a trait from his poodle side. "Sampson is 120 pounds, so while he is overweight, he is also a big, squishy soft ball of love," she says.



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Cesar brings him to work one day a week. The team at Dr. Daniel Burns' practice keeps the door to the waiting room closed on the day Sampson is there, and puts up a sign to inform visitors the therapy dog is duty.

"We let patients know what to expect. Sampson is not a fast-moving dog," she explains. "He usually just walks up, wags his tail and wants someone to pet him.

"The first time I brought him in we had a 12 year-old girl with a lot of anxiety. Sampson stays by my

side, so when she sat down next to Dr. Burns, Sampson and I joined her, and she relaxed. Her mom had tears in her eyes."

A nurturer and mom, Cesar likes to help. But if a patient is not a dog person, Sampson waits patiently in Dr. Burns' office. "If we can help relieve someone's anxiety, I want us to do so, and make their visit a good experience."

While on duty, Sampson wears a blue vest, earned when he completed a four-month certification process. The dental team received training from Mid-Michigan Therapy Dogs Inc., also known as "Angels With Paws." The program is recognized by the AKC, Cesar says, adding, "Sampson has a badge, and I had to be tested and certified, as well."

"The program monitors that its canines are current with their shots, and that they can handle being with kids and the elderly," she says.

In addition to her position at Clarkston Smiles, Cesar holds leadership roles in Durand youth sports programs and lives near the Durand school complex, where she recognized Sampson's calling.

"I noticed that Sampson liked to go outside and wait for the kids to go by," she says. "I saw how good he was with the kids of all ages, how he would patiently wait for them and how they would just come on over and love on him."

She wasn't surprised.

"Sampson got us through some tough times," Cesar says. "When the boys' dad passed away, he was there for them. He was taught at a young age to show affection, when someone was sad or in need of nurturing. Sampson was a therapy dog for us before he even realized it."

The duo brings comfort to other populations, too.

"Every Monday, we go to the Durand Senior Care and Rehab Center, where everyone knows his name," Cesar says. "There is a lady with dementia who does not recognize nurses, but remembers Sampson."

While Sampson brings joy and comfort, he's rewarded, too.

"The residents and staff give him treats and look forward to him coming," Cesar says. "And it gives him a purpose. He loves to go, and he is quite pleased when I help him put his vest on."

In his service, "The only mishap we have experienced was when a gentleman fed him at the nursing home, and it was hot, and so Sampson threw up," Cesar says. "Which is why I always carry a bag with me."

She plans to keep sharing Sampson's unique type of therapy. "We would absolutely love to do this more; it is very rewarding for the both of us."