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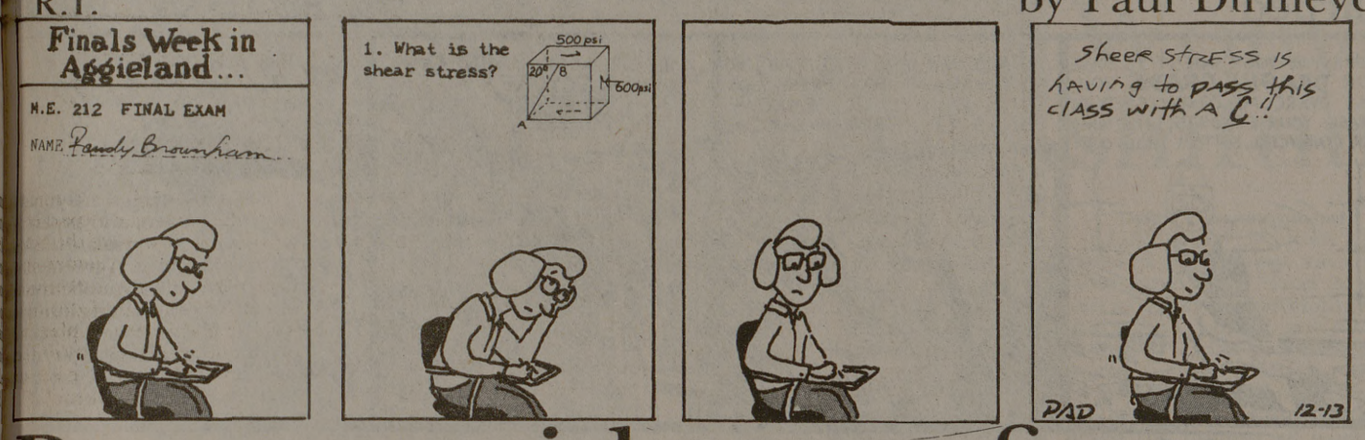

by Paul Dirmeyer

Pets provide comfort, friendship for elderly

by Julie Ennis

Battalion Reporter

Slowly moving back and forth in a trance-like manner, her rocking chair disrupts the silence of the dimly lit room. The old woman unconsciously taps her finger on the wooden arm of the chair to the beat. Creak, tap, creak, tap, creak, tap, creak, tap, creak... She stares out of her window into a world that she feels isolated from.

Suddenly she stops, her face lights up, and she smiles as a small kitten runs across the garden and darts up the tree near her window.

"Animals are especially effective in drawing out the elderly who have become isolated and withdrawn from society," Betty Franklin, a social service worker with the State Health Department said.

When the elderly begin to suffer from the loss of relatives and withdraw from their active lifestyles, the objects and animals which provided security in early life begin to assume greater importance in their lives, she said.

Animals have relatively random and unpredictable activities and mannerisms that will sustain the interest of an elderly person, she said.

"Animals won't make value judgements, there is a slim chance of rejection and positive feedback is almost assured," Franklin said. "They have a great capacity for acceptance, adoration, attention, forgiveness, and unconditional love."

The animals act as a catalyst, thus increasing the level of physical action and social interaction among the elderly or between the residents and staff of care facilities, Franklin said.

The visiting pet program seemed to lessen the depressing atmosphere and created a better morale among the staff and the residents, she said. The animals created a common bond that inabled them to talk to people they might not have talked to before, she said.

Dr. William McCulloch, a Texas A&M professor of veternary public health and director of the Center of Comparative Medicine is directly involved with the development and implementation of pet therapy sessions and human/animal bond education at Texas A&M. He also helped with the visiting pet program.

"Animals promote a sense of resposibility on the part of the patient and a feeling of being needed," McCulloch said. "Pets aren't going to solve all problems though."

Last fall the "Visiting Pet Pilot Project" was initiated at Sherwood Health Care Facility.

The primary objective of the visiting pet project was to introduce a non-threatening animal to serve as a catalytic vehicle that formed adaptive and satisfying social interactions, Franklin said.

Dogs were chosen because they were effective in their ability to offer love and touching reassurrance without criticism, McCulloch said.

The carefully selected dogs were brought to the home by volunteers for one hour periods. Two sessions were planned on Tuesday mornings and one night session was set on Thursday evenings.

Any resident that wanted to participate in the program was allowed to do so, Franklin said.

Patients positively related to the animals in non-verbal and physical interactions like touching and stroking, she said.

"The dogs brought humor into a relatively gloomy environment," she said. "The patients began laughing and talking to other patients and the staff."

Franklin said animals create a "buffer zone" between the volunteers and the aged patients.

Sometimes volunteers are reluctant to get too close to the elderly person, and an animal creates a common ground that releases the inhibitions that are associated with dealing with the elderly, she said.

Although state law does not establish specific guidelines to forbid pets from nursing homes, McCulloch said certain guidelines were followed for the visiting pet program at Sherwood.

Trial request denied

United Press International

LAKE CHARLES, La. — A federal magistrate has recommended against ordering a new trial for convicted killer Joe Lewis Perry, who claimed blacks were unfairly excluded from Calcasieu Parish juries at the time of his trial.

Magistrate Joe Tritico Monday said defense attorneys now may file objections to his recommendation, after which U.S. District Judge Earl Veron will rule on Perry's request for a new trial.

An all-white jury in 1981 convicted the 20-year-old black man from Houston of first-degree murder in the 1980 shooting death of a 58-year-old Florida truck driver during a robbery at an Interstate 10 rest area near Vinton.

Court records showed the truck driver pulled into the rest area shortly after Perry, a friend and two women drove in. Records indicated Perry pointed a gun at the man and demanded money, then shot him four times and stole his wallet when he said he had no cash.

Perry's girlfriend later turned him in to authorities.

Veron in late June halted Perry's scheduled July 1 execution, giving defense attorneys time to challenge jury composition in the parish during the five-year period.

Tritico heard evidence and reviewed records in the case in late August, September and October. The magistrate said he completed his several-hundred-page report last week.

Tritico disagreed with defense claims prosecutors systematically excluded blacks from juries from 1976 to 1981. He said even if that had occurred, the evidence was strong enough to convict Perry.

Tritico also said any errors that might have been made during Perry's trial were harmless.

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THRU Saturday, 12/17/83

Happy Holidays!