

CREATURE COMFORTS

THERAPY ANIMALS HELP ANXIOUS PATIENTS OF ALL AGES GET THROUGH THEIR DENTAL WORK.



CALM AND COLLECTED: Joey Aquilino, at ease with Shea in his lap

JOEY AQUILINO spends the 20-minute car ride from his home in Toms River, New Jersey, to Dr. Donn Winokur's dental practice in Lakewood Township excited to see Shea, a friend he hasn't visited in a few months.

Anthony Aquilino, Joey's father, has booked regular dental appointments for his

special-needs son since he was 6. Joey is now 35. Shea is a 7-year-old West Highland White Terrier, a therapy dog who since 2011 has been in charge of putting Dr. Winokur's more anxious Ocean Family Dental patients at ease.

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Dr. Winokur enters the treatment room with Shea following close behind. Once Joey is settled into the chair, Shea, clad in a red "Therapy Dog" jacket, hops into his lap, where she'll remain, motionless and silent, for the duration of the visit. As needed, she'll press herself more firmly against him to calm him further. "Joey actually looks forward to coming here now," Anthony says. "It's still difficult for him, but if Shea weren't here,



WELCOME WAGGIN': Anyiah Milligan (with her mother, Angela Sanchez) makes her first visit to the dentist.

he'd be struggling and thrashing."

Two days a week, Dr. Winokur — who graduated from West Virginia University School of Dentistry and has focused on pediatrics since 1973 — heads to the Jersey Shore Medical Center, 25 miles north, where he treats special-needs kids who require general



DOC'S BEST FRIEND: Shea and Dr. Donn Winokur

Writer: Kristie Ceruti. Photographs by Brad J. Barry

Photographs courtesy of Dr. Beatriz De La Roche (A Meow in the Mix, 3)



DOGGED EFFORT: Eleven-year-old Scotty Thompson with Shea

anesthesia for procedures. At his practice, though, Shea helps him keep it simple. "I don't use any sedation in the office; I just try to use behavior management," he says. "The therapy dog is part of that." Appointments typically last 20 to 25 minutes, though Shea is capable of much lengthier procedures — two hours for crown placement, for example.

Later that day, another of Dr. Winokur's patients arrives: a boy named Scotty Thompson, an 11-year-old with cerebral palsy. Up goes Shea into his lap, and Dr. Winokur begins his treatment. Previously, Scotty "wouldn't stay still," says his mother, Marge Horning. "This used to be a huge battle."

It isn't anymore. "This makes believers out of people," Dr. Winokur says, gesturing toward Shea. Scotty, calm and collected, is certainly one of them.

GIVING PAWS: Don't miss therapy dog Shea in action at Dr. Donn Winokur's New Jersey office: benco.com/sheaf/



A DESERVED REST: Shea winds down at the end of a long day.

A MEOW IN THE MIX

SIX MONTHS AGO, when a tiny orange kitten arrived on the doorstep of Tender Care Pediatric Dentistry in Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania, "it took one afternoon to see her potential," says Dr. Beatriz De La Roche. "I put her in my pocket and noticed that when I would get close to a nervous patient, she would get out, lie down next to the patient and purr. The kids felt so good about it." Ginger (given her name via a patient contest; the staff calls her "Gingivitis" when she's misbehaving) has been there ever since.



ORANGE CRUSH: Dr. Beatriz De La Roche with Ginger and a young patient



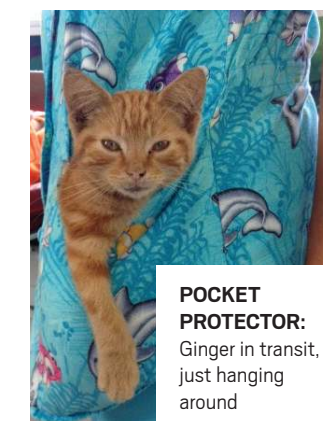
ESCAPE CLAWS: Ginger's nail caps prevent scratches.

Dr. De La Roche, an animal lover who opened Tender Care Pediatric eight years ago, had long considered a therapy pet — a dog or even a hermit crab — but nothing seemed apt until Ginger arrived. "She makes a big difference, especially for those with special needs," the doctor says.

Her experience with one longtime patient, a 16-year-old with autism, is evidence. "He was very nervous, screaming," Dr. De La Roche says. "We thought Ginger was going to be scared, but right away the patient said 'love kitty!' We did the cleaning, and he stayed there petting her. That was memorable."

Also memorable is Ginger's appearance. Dr. De La Roche refuses on principle to have her declawed, so Ginger wears nail caps. "Right now she's wearing pink nails. Sometimes she'll have a French manicure, sometimes sparkles. She's a girly girl; the kids love it."

Dr. De La Roche — who, remarkably, is allergic to cats — is diligent about her patients' exposure to Ginger. "We ask parents before we bring her in. We have special wipes for her that remove all loose fur. In the morning, the staff wipes her, and she's ready to go."



POCKET PROTECTOR: Ginger in transit, just hanging around

ARE SAYING BEHIND YOUR BACK," INCLUDING "MY DENTIST HAS A HORRIBLE TEMPER" AND "MY DENTIST FLIRTED WITH ME!" . . . THE "TODAY" SHOW RECENTLY RAN A SEGMENT ABOUT WHAT OBSERVATIONS CAN BE GLEANED FROM THE WAY PEOPLE SMILE, INCLUDING

EARNING POWER, MARITAL FIDELITY AND FERTILITY. . . VICKY KESTON, THE MOTHER OF TWO YOUNG CHILDREN, HAS DEVELOPED A MOBILE GAME CALLED "CAVITY DRAGONS" TO HELP EDUCATE KIDS BETWEEN AGES 3 AND 8 ABOUT FOODS THAT CAN CAUSE TOOTH DECAY. . .