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# A dog and a dentist making a difference

Dr. Jonathan Knapp seeks community help in the Mission of Mercy clinic to provide free dental care for thousands who need it. You can learn more about the Connecticut Mission of Mercy at [www.csda-public.com/CTMOM/CTMOM.html](http://www.csda-public.com/CTMOM/CTMOM.html)



MICHAEL DUFFY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jetta, 16, Dr. Jonathan Knapp's therapy dog, visits Ellen Shea, of New Fairfield, during her appointment with Dr. Knapp in this Bethel office.

# Jetta: A canine nurse puts patients at ease in dental office

By Kristin Nord  
Contributing Writer

Jetta has been greeting patients at Dr. Jonathan Knapp's dentistry office in Bethel ever since she was a pup, generating good will, reducing stress, and quite possibly encouraging healing without even being aware of it.

Now ancient in dog years, but no less kind, she sleeps a lot more at 16 than she did when she was 6 weeks old. But her patient demeanor still prompts pats, hugs and thank-you notes, and in a recent case, a portrait of the pooch as part angel.

Knapp began taking her to the office to help her become socialized and to make sure she wasn't left alone at home all day. The sweet natured

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Jetta soothes the nerves of patients young and old. She helps alleviate the memories of long-ago pain from a tooth ache, or the dread of teeth being ground in preparation for a crown. While it's rare for a patient to suffer pain in the dentist's chair, Knapp said it's hard for some patients, even now, to forget experiences of sessions from their childhood.

Knapp, whose father practiced dentistry for many years in Danbury, insists no one today should have to be uncomfortable for any procedure.

But for those with long memories, like the man who arrived and stiffened the moment he got into the chair, Jetta's presence can be a godsend. The day Knapp found a normally anxious older patient down on the floor, playing with Jetta, the man

seemed like a new man when he climbed into the chair.

"It was a major breakthrough with him," Knapp said.

Research is showing that petting dogs and cats can lower blood pressure and stimulate the release of endorphins, serotonin and dopamine. It's little wonder people are turning to these animals for therapeutic support after a heart attack, or in the midst of recovering from trauma.

Increasingly, animal-assisted therapy is being used in conjunction with other forms of treatment for people with mental illnesses, such as dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

But back to Knapp's office, which simply offers a kind-hearted approach to each visit. For children, Jetta's ministrations prompt immediate responses.

"I love you, Jetta," a young patient named Anthony exclaimed in a note not too long ago.

While Knapp is happy Jetta makes a difference in the lives of his patients, he wants to help many others, as well. To that end, he is involved in the planning of a free dental clinic that will be held next spring in Danbury. It's expected the clinic will serve more than 2,000 patients in two days, and much help is needed to make the event a reality.

The Connecticut Foundation For Dental Outreach, in collaboration with The Connecticut State Dental Association, will be holding the fifth annual Connecticut Mission of Mercy on March 23 and 24 in 2012. It will be at the O'Neill Center at Western Connecticut State University.



MICHAEL DUFFY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Judy Dauphin, who works in Dr. Knapp's Bethel office, holds a drawing of Jetta, Knapp's therapy dog. The drawing is by Camryn Schilling, 8, a patient of Knapp's.

This large-scale, free dental clinic has been held in various parts of Connecticut. Residents can learn more at [www.csdapublic.com/CTMOM/CTMOM.html](http://www.csdapublic.com/CTMOM/CTMOM.html).

"I am on the board of CFDO, and am serving as the local arrangements liaison," said Knapp. "In that capacity, I'd appreciate the opportunity to discuss the project with civic groups,

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businesses and charitable organizations. We hope to have full participation from the Danbury community since the event cannot happen without the support of our friends and neighbors."

Knapp said monetary donations are needed, as well as in-kind donations of goods and services in order to provide for the 1,600 to 1,800 volunteers and over 2,000 patients expected next March.

"Most importantly, we want to make certain that all local social service agencies and community advocacy groups, as well as any member of our community who might want to come to CTMOM as a patient, are made aware of the project," he said. "It's estimated between 600,000 and 1 million people in Connecticut have no dental insurance. Somehow or another we need a way to provide proper care to the folks who need it.

Knapp added there are people who haven't seen a dentist in 10 to 20 years or more, and have only been able to get care because of these Mission of Mercy programs; the last one was in Waterbury this past April. That one provided \$1,200,000 in free care to 1,852 patients.

A Danbury native, Knapp said he is excited the next one will be at WestConn. He encouraged anyone who would like to help, or who wants further information, to call him at his office at 1 Diamond Ave. in Bethel. at 203-748-6935.