

# Comfort, Unconditionally

“She does not judge, and many times people who come to treatment feeling broken and unloved get the chance to feel loved instead of judged for their past mistakes or for the choices they have made.”

“She” represents one of Community and Family Resources’ latest full-time staff members, having recently graduated into the field of behavioral health with a mastery in soothing the soul—something that Andrea Ortner, a Substance Abuse Counselor and to whom the introductory quote belongs, confirms. While describing her coworker’s comforting demeanor, the counselor’s tone assumes at times a bit of bewilderment at how her colleague can so easily disarm the tension of those in distress: “she just brings a smile to a person’s face, and takes away the tension that one may be feeling. She can light up a room when she walks in.”

Granted, *soul-soothing* cannot be found among the learning objectives in a formal education program at a college or university, but it was imperative for Ortner’s colleague to master a rather exhaustive training regimen that, akin to elite military forces, not all participants can physically or mentally complete.



*Omaha with CFR staff member*

Granted still, this recent CFR staff member cannot be easily found among a group of people at all—if one were looking for a person in the first place—instead, she is a one-year-old, purebred Yellow Labrador named Omaha, who insists on soothing those in distress. Although stationed primarily at the Fort Dodge location, Omaha also frequents CFR’s surrounding outpatient facilities located across an eight-county service area, where she continues to connect to, well, everybody.

Along with Ortner, CFR Recovery Advocate, Liz Dueker, also handles Omaha’s care and continued training. Speaking to the canine’s emotional intelligence, Dueker recalls a past client who was experiencing such great distress that that client was ready to leave the CFR’s residential facility. This client insisted that recovery seemed too impossible—a sentiment often shared by those who have bravely chosen to walk its path.

Handling Omaha on this particular occasion, Dueker permitted her to sit in while she spoke with the client. Dueker describes, “When [the client] finally sat





down, I allowed Omaha to jump onto the bed, and she immediately nudged the client with her head and snout,” a response that Omaha was thoroughly trained to exhibit in such situations, and among a spectrum of human emotions. Dueker continues: “still upset and at this point crying, the client then began to hug Omaha. During our talk, Omaha didn’t leave the client’s side; she laid next to the individual, put her head on the client’s lap at times, and sometimes gave the client’s hand a reassuring lick or nudge with her little nose.” Omaha’s trained instinct helped mitigate a crisis into what Dueker assured as “something more manageable so that the individual could focus on the ‘bigger picture,’ reconsider the consequences of leaving, and remember what they are truly fighting for.”

Ortner recalls a similar experience at another local facility. As is the case with those re-entering society from incarceration, one particular client whom Ortner describes as once “broken and lost, full of hurt and pain” has since learned to regulate himself while in the presence of Omaha, whom he looks forward to visiting as part of his ongoing recovery. She has since garnered much attention from other similar clients who have also exhibited such progress as a result of Omaha’s company.

And this compassion is not limited to specific locations. As a required part of Omaha’s training of proper socialization and obedience, she accompanies her handlers to public settings. During one trip to a Marshall’s retailer, Omaha sensed one shopper exhibiting signs of grief, prompting the canine to approach and comfort in response.

Omaha’s abilities are a culmination of extensive training under the purview of the Canine Assistance Rehabilitation Education & Services, or CARES, agency in Concordia, Kansas, where it began in 1994 to coordinate canine services including therapy dogs (like Omaha), assistance dogs, search-and-rescue dogs, and narcotic-detection dogs, for either people living with a range of accommodations or for local agencies requesting a particular service suited perfectly for well-trained dogs. Most puppies selected for training are born into private residences; some dogs entering CARES are former show dogs. All entrants are carefully selected, trained, tested, and certified. Those not able to complete the program are adopted out into the community. In Omaha’s case as well as others, she was fostered out to one of two Kansas penitentiaries, Ellsworth and Hutchinson, where selected inmates diligently help with basic obedience and care for their assigned canines for up to 18 months, until the dogs transition to the CARES training facility for more specialized training. Labradors are the most common breed, but CARES has also trained German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, and Border Collies.

Unique to CARES is not only its comprehensive training services for canines, but also its requirement that all human companions must undergo a 40-hour week’s worth of extensive training relevant to maintaining the dog’s general care and basic obedience, as well as advancing the canine’s specific training objectives—a regimen that does not cease after





graduation. “Being mindful of what’s going on does not stop at all,” Ortner admits of any handler’s necessary commitment.

For any genuine dog lover, however, such commitment is not at all burdensome.

CFR Executive Director, Michelle De La Riva, and her family have been affiliated with CARES since 2011, a period she fondly reminisces: “During the years that my kids were in school, they included the puppies in their Community Service Project as well as in the Dog Obedience Classes. All of the puppies had the opportunity to socialize at school with the kids and at CFR during the summers when the kids were not in school.” Omaha represents the 16<sup>th</sup> foster puppy for De La Riva and her family, representing a legacy of commitment rivaled perhaps only by the loyalty of the family’s past and present four-legged companions, whose effect author Dan Gemeinhart’s captures beautifully in words: “Dogs...live brave, beautiful lives. They protect their families. And love us. And make our lives a little brighter. And they don't waste time being afraid of tomorrow.”

Omaha reminds us daily of just that.

CARES Inc., is a private corporation with the majority of family shareholders. The CARES Foundation is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit foundation. For more information, visit <http://www.caresks.com/> or contact CEO Sarah Holbert, Megan Lewellyn, or Amanda Blackwood at 1-800-498-1077. CARES’ professional therapy dogs, like Omaha, are tasked-trained to meet the legal requirements of the Kansas assistance dog state statutes.

Community and Family Resources (CFR) offers substance use, mental health, and problem gambling treatment and preventions services. Counties served by CFR include Boone, Calhoun, Hamilton, Humboldt, Pocahontas, Story, Webster, and Wright. In FY2019, CFR offered treatment services to 2,684 individuals and reached 8,075 individuals through preventions services in schools, businesses, and community groups. For additional information, please visit CFR’s website at [www.cfrhelps.org](http://www.cfrhelps.org) or call 515-576-7261.

