

Comfort for Casa Pacifica children is big, black, furry

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A young girl puts her arm around Archie.

Lying on the floor and snoring gently, Archibald Razz M Tazz took up nearly all the walking space in Vicki Murphy's office.

Called Archie for short, the 165-pound Newfoundland is an imposing sight. He's covered in thick black fur that in places resembles hair. A water dog, his gangly legs end in huge webbed paws. Jowls sag at the corners of his mouth. Standing 3 feet tall, Archie looks more like a bear than a dog.

Such an unusually large dog can be intimidating, especially to children. But Newfoundlands are known for their sweet dispositions and Archie's is exceptional.

He belongs to the children of Casa Pacifica, a residential treatment facility in Camarillo for abused, neglected and emotionally disturbed children.

Vicki Murphy, Casa Pacifica director of operations, has seen Archie work magic, consoling the inconsolable.

"He's a gentle giant," Murphy said.

Newfoundlands are sturdy breeds that can hold up under a lot of physical contact from children. The children have rolled over on him, tugged at his ears and used him as a pillow and the like. The 20-month-old pup doesn't mind a bit. When researching which breed to acquire for the facility's animal-assisted therapy, Murphy found that Newfoundlands are the best to work with emotionally disturbed children.

This type of therapy can open the door for mental health professionals to connect with children who may not respond to adults because of the trauma caused by a family breakup, domestic violence, emotional dysfunction, child abuse or neglect. Archie can help them communicate their pain.

Murphy said Archie is a coping strategy for children who've been removed from their homes and come here to live. One little girl was very distraught when she was recently admitted. Archie was called in to work his calming magic. He walked up to the young girl and quietly plopped down in front of her. She flung her small arms around his furry neck, sobbing for quite awhile. Archie happily obliged and stayed with her as long as she needed him, Murphy said.

And two young sisters who returned from having spent the day in court immediately asked to see Archie. They too hugged him and cried on his shoulders.

That's typical of the work Archie does at Casa Pacifica. His presence soothes the children; they feel safe hugging him, looking into his sympathetic, droopy eyes, and telling him their troubles.

Archie seems to know the children need his calming demeanor. When at work, he doesn't jump or charge at them; he won't sniff or probe them with his nose. He doesn't overpower children, not even toddlers. He'll flop down in front of them with his paws out to the side so that he's at their eye level. He remains docile even when tiny fingers probe his eyes, nose and ears and stroke or pull his tail.

That's not to say that Archie likes everyone. He didn't like two employees in the year and a half that he's been here, barking whenever he saw them or heard them speak, Murphy said. After a thorough background check revealed something undesirable, they were fired. But Archie had sensed something about them from the beginning.

"He's an amazing judge of character," Murphy said.

He's a popular figure on campus. After arriving at Casa Pacifica with Murphy, he makes the rounds every morning to greet all of the staff members. Throughout the day, children take him around the grounds for a walk. One girl, when asked why, said, "He's the best dog in the world."

At the end of each day and on weekends, Murphy takes the lumbering, bearlike Archie home to care for him. But she's ever conscious that he does not belong to her.

"He's the children's dog," Murphy said.

At Murphy's house, Archie behaves as dogs usually do. He jumps up and runs to the door when someone knocks and sniffs them when they come inside, she said.

But at Casa Pacifica, "He knows he's at work," Murphy said.

The placid pup has inspired children to pen their praise. One boy, who at first was afraid of dogs, ended his book about Archie with "Archie will be in my heart forever." Although the boy no longer lives at Casa Pacifica, he calls and visits from time to time to check on Archie.

Thousand Oaks residents Mary and Tony Tesoro bought Archie for the Casa Pacifica children. Mary Tesoro sits on the board of directors.

"Personally, I think animals give you unconditional love, and some children can't relate to (other) people what they've been through," Tesoro said. "He's been quite a gift for the children."

Adults in their life may not have hugged these children in quite a long time, but they can hug Archie and not feel rejected, she added.

Caring for Archie is costly, and Casa Pacifica needs donations from the community to help pay for his upkeep. Because he needs prescription food for his stressed joints, it has to be purchased from a veterinarian. Westlake veterinarian Steve Rosenstein, who has donated a lifetime of care for Archie, sells the food to Casa Pacifica at his cost. But Archie eats through 40 pounds of food every 10 days or so.

And his long, thick fur must be shaved down every month. Not only for hygienic reasons but so that he doesn't become a fearsome sight to the children. Grooming costs about \$100 a month. The endearing Archie also drools. He must wear specially made heavy absorbency bibs around his neck that are large enough for giant breeds. The bibs cost \$38.

Whenever a child is discharged from Casa Pacifica, they leave with a book about Newfoundlands "autographed" with a stamp of Archie. Donations would help ensure a book goes home with every child.

For more information about Archie, call Murphy at (805) 445-7804.