



Jane Charmelo

out & about

Eve, handlers aim to soothe those with heavy hearts

It's always nice to hear how Lombard's own Eve Comfort Dog has been bringing both joy and calm to area school children, seniors and other groups—or helping ease anxieties as travelers prepare to fly out of O'Hare Airport.

But there are times when her job is to be there for individuals and groups who have experienced a traumatic event.

Which means, of course, that her handlers also face the aftermath of such situations, and according to Michele Arellano, one of Eve's handlers, those are assignments for which the handlers have been trained.

Arellano is now the "top dog" handler for Eve, who will be 5 in June and has been with St. John's Lutheran Church in Lombard since December 2015. Eve is part of the Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) Comfort Dog Ministry and also its K-9 police ministry.

Eve is one of over 130 golden retriever comfort dogs in over 20 states, since the program was launched in 2008, according to the LCC website. Illinois has one of the training facilities; the other is in Nebraska.

As top dog, Arellano is responsible for administrative work, scheduling and social media, in addition to taking Eve to various events.

She said the comfort dog ministry program at St. John's has evolved since Eve came along, adding that there are 13 handlers and a total of 20 volunteers.

"We have a big team now," she said proudly, adding that her "right hand" person, Lenore Welsh, serves as a community liaison to handle new requests for visits and goes to the locations to explain the program, then maintains a relationship.

"I couldn't do it without her," Arellano praised, adding that as the ministry expanded, "I had to grow the team."

It's like that all across America, she said, relating that the LCC



Eve Comfort Dog (fourth from right) and her caregivers Mike and Mary Millett, from St. John's Lutheran Church in Lombard, were among other Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) Comfort Dog Ministry handlers and dogs to attend the recent funeral of McHenry Deputy Jacob Keltner. Said handler Michele Arellano, "She knows when she's really needed."

PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY MICHELE ARELLANO *Lombardian/Villa Park Review*

Comfort Dog Ministry "has grown so much across the country."

The police ministry has grown as well, Arellano said, but differs in that the dog's handler has a job or close relationship with law enforcement.

Eve has gone on a number of deployments, as they are called, in the last year alone that have involved tragic situations, Arellano outlined, such as visiting Glenbard East High School last April after a number of students were injured in a fire pit explosion.

First and foremost, she emphasized, "We always wait for an invitation," which typically comes from the LCC, finding dogs in the area and/or who are available for the deployment.

In this instance, "The counselors' office called me directly," Arellano said, adding that Eve spent two days at the high school, to offer comfort to the students.

Eve attended the visitation and funeral for Sheriff's Deputy Christopher Lambert who was struck and killed Jan. 12 on I-294, and was at the funeral of McHenry Sheriff's

Deputy Jacob Keltner, who was killed Thursday, March 7.

Another deployment for Eve was to help provide comfort at the local schools and police in Aurora after the Friday, Feb. 15, shootings at Henry Pratt that left five people dead and five police officers wounded.

In that instance, Arellano said, "We had to clear the schedule" for the week, and she said the groups whose visits were cancelled were proud of "their" dog being called to duty.

She said during the following week, some 12 comfort dogs visited the different schools and the police station.

"We've now established a relationship with the Aurora Police Department," Arellano said.

Recently, Eve went to visit students at an Oswego school after the death of a student to offer comfort to the students and staff.

When asked how the handlers face such tragic situations, Arellano said that first of all, "The most important thing is our handlers. They just give up so much," whether it be taking off work or volunteering personal time to go where they are needed.

She explained that the handlers receive not only training in how to work with the comfort dogs, but also in how to deal with questions and other interactions with the individuals who approach Eve.

"People generally approach us because of the dog," Arellano said, and the handlers "wait for them to talk," or not say anything. "We have to feel it out and see where it goes."

"You have to see where the conversation takes you," she added, recalling with a chuckle that a child once asked what religion Eve is.

"Christian" was the response, Arellano related.

And what about Eve? After all, she spends part of her days being touched, hugged and petted. Wouldn't that stress anybody out?

Absolutely, says Arellano. The handlers all work to make sure Eve not only has down time but also is limited to about an hour-and-a-half of work before getting a break.

Her work is "rewarded after every engagement," she continued, emphasizing, "We were taught how to recognize signs of stress."

Eve gets playtime when the vest comes off, and "she gets a massage every night," Arellano outlined, as well as daily grooming, walks and a chance to be in a quiet place and rest.

"She is very, very well taken care of," Arellano pointed out, adding that Eve gets days off and also, "LCC is pretty adamant that the dogs not be worked for two or three days" after a lengthy deployment.

Arellano said she believes Eve is so calm because the handlers are

"constantly reassuring her. We've got her back. She knows the handlers are protecting her."

"Eve knows when she's working," she observed, adding that she can see a difference in the dog's demeanor during sobering visits, such as a police funeral.

"She sits straighter, she sits taller and looks straight ahead," Arellano described.

"She knows she's got important stuff to do."

With the tragic circumstances in which handlers find themselves, for Arellano, "It is such a defining moment in people's lives, and it's a privilege to be invited; and you're a part of it."

She added that handlers undergo debriefing after such deployments.

On the more joyous side, Eve has been establishing new and continuing relationships with area schools, such as Addison Trail, York and Willowbrook high schools, the Helen Plum Library, the Ronald McDonald House, the Proton Center and the Lombard Junior Women's Club TLC Camp for children with

cancer and a sibling.

Eve has earned a partnership award from the Ray Graham Association, and a school in Lemont District 113A enjoys her so much that a teacher wrote a grant (to help build an outdoor run) and the school sold T-shirts to help fund her ministry, which is based solely on donations.

Arellano mentioned, for example, how LCC comfort dogs in California were deployed after the raging wildfires, so here in Illinois, the team has a saying that covers the whole country's group of LCC volunteers.

"We're all part of one big family," she said, and St. John's motto is, "When one goes, we all go."

To learn more about Eve's ministry, visit stjohnslombard.org and click on Ministries, or visit her Facebook page at facebook.com/Eve/ComfortDog.

To learn more about the comfort dog ministry at Lutheran Church Charities, visit lutheranchurchcharities.org.



Mary and Mike Millett also brought Eve to a celebration of life for the Henry Pratt families and first responders, held last weekend at Aurora East High School. Here, Eve is also pictured with Aurora Police Chief Kristen Ziman.



There are times when Eve can be a soothing influence on a child, in this case one afraid to touch her with his hands. His feet served as the next best thing. According to Arellano, Eve is "a comfort rug with a heartbeat."