



Jane Charmelo

out & about

Offering comfort takes some creativity

As individuals are being told to keep a social distance and avoid unnecessary contact with each other, St. John's Lutheran Church in Lombard is trying to find other ways to offer support, through its Comfort Dog Ministry.

Eve Comfort Dog has had to put her "duties" on hold for the time being, visiting airports, senior centers, schools and other facilities, to name a few.

However, her handlers came up with a way for her "friends" to see her, albeit from a distance, according to one of her handlers, Michele Arellano.

Eve has gone "from a full calendar to an empty calendar," she lamented, meaning that with schools closed and facilities not accepting visitors, Eve has not been able to stop by for a visit and get her hugs and smiles.

However, residents of the Park Place senior living community in Elmhurst, one of her regular stops, got at least a glimpse of her recently, thanks to a little bit of ingenuity.

As Arellano tells it, handlers were "trying to think of ways we could still be active in the community," adding, "We were looking for ways to serve ... We're so concerned about the elderly. They're so isolated."

She said they thought of Park Place because it is "a building that's conducive to [a] window visit."

"The grounds are flat [and] there are people living on the first floor," Arellano described.

And, the Park Place contact person said, "We would love to have you come," she mentioned.

The purpose of the visits was to "bring hope and encouragement" during this time of isolation and confinement, said Associate Pastor Pete Imlah, one of the handlers who took Eve to Park Place with his two daughters. He said it was worth the trip "just to put some smiles on people's faces," adding that some of the Park Place residents either don't

have family or cannot have them visit, and residents are now not able to eat meals together.

"I can just imagine how difficult it is for many of them," Imlah commented, saying that as they walked around the grounds, Eve went up to a window and on command put her paws up on the ledge to greet a resident.

"That just warmed my heart," he recalled, adding that he carried a sign that said, "You're pawsome."

He said as they walked around, the dog seemed to be asking, "Why aren't we going in? Why aren't I getting to visit?"

Senior Pastor Dan Wegrzyn and his son also took Eve on a walk-around, and looking back, he said, "We're trying to make the best of a bad situation."

"We're trying to bridge a gap" to provide some comfort to others, as Eve's ministry was designed to do, he continued.

Wegrzyn described a gray, gloomy day when he took Eve to Park Place, but it didn't seem to matter as the residents saw her parading past their windows.

"When they saw her out the window, one lady was dancing!" he described, and it felt as if the "windows kind of brightened up when she passed by."

Both pastors also described residents coming out on their balconies to get a glimpse of their furry friend.

Arellano acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic has been "absolutely paralyzing" across the board, and in order to let Eve's ministry continue at present, "You have to find creative ways to do it."

She mentioned that the dog's most recent deployments had been the shooting at a Milwaukee brewery and a high school shooting in Kentucky; the kinds of assignments she and other comfort dogs through Lutheran Church Charities are trained for.

In the meantime, the handlers keep their schedules with Eve, and when they pick her up, "Transfer of the dog occurs in the yard," Arellano outlined, and her leash is wiped down.

The handlers take her for walks but she does not wear her "working" vest that says "please pet me," to discourage close contact.

Arellano said Eve's ministry has continued in a round-about way, because while she can't make her usual visit to the Ronald McDonald House, through her own separate bank account, parents who stay there were able to get gift cards for local restaurants to get meals brought in since volunteers cannot be there to cook.

"That fits in with our ministry," Arellano said.

A group of students from Lemont, where Eve goes to visit, even sent a video saying how much they miss her, the handler mentioned.

Imlah acknowledged that "So many things we were doing have been put on pause," with no pun intended.

"We are encouraging people to check in with each other," he said, adding, "The church is not a building."

Arellano quipped that with all the walks Eve has been taking, "She'll be so physically fit by the end of this."

But even though Eve doesn't get to see her human friends and get hugs, "She's a happy dog," she added.

Wegrzyn said that being able to still share Eve is "a ministry of presence; that's the most we could do," and his message is that "People need to hang on to hope when they're really afraid."

He sees "the goodness that's coming out of other people," and believes that "God is creating a new pathway" during this time of crisis, and that "We stand on God and his work."

It's often that when we are



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHELE ARELLANO Lombardian

Associate Pastor Pete Imlah and his daughters visited Park Place in Elmhurst, to let the residents know that while they couldn't give Eve Comfort Dog any hugs, she was there to put a smile on their face.

"brought to our knees, [we] reach deep in ourselves," the pastor commented.

Arellano said Eve also has a few messages to share with her friends, one of which is, "She's missing all of her regular humans."

But as much as she enjoys the interactions, the most important message right now, said Arellano with a

chuckle, is "Please sit and stay."

For more information about Eve's Comfort Dog Ministry and virtual services, visit stjohnslombard.org.



Eve Comfort Dog gets as up close and personal as she can to greet a resident at Park Place in Elmhurst, with some help from Pastor Pete.

A message from DuPage County Board Chairman Dan Cronin

Our world has significantly changed over the last few months. DuPage County has acted quickly and decisively on several fronts to combat the spread of COVID-19 while preserving the operations of essential County business. Like everyone, we have transformed operations rapidly, shifting to remote work, split shifts and employing appropriate public health recommendations.

We have also provided essential assistance to non-profits, small businesses, municipalities and healthcare providers who join us in meeting the unique needs of our residents during this unprecedented public health response.

We all have a role to play. We're asking everyone to continue to observe the health guidelines that are now part of our everyday lives: Stay home if you're sick, wash your hands, practice social distancing and respiratory etiquette by covering coughs and sneezes. We can each do our part to help our friends and neighbors stay safe and stay healthy. Be well.



St. John's Lutheran Church Senior Pastor Dan Wegrzyn and his son took Eve Comfort Dog to visit her friends at Park Place in Elmhurst to bring a little sunshine and warmth on an otherwise cloudy day.