There are many studies and authors that have written about animals and their potential therapeutic value. Although opinion, theory, and fact must be separated, there is widespread evidence that supports the many benefits animals provide humans. While many animal therapy organizations exist and function at high levels in various settings, the prospective opportunities are even greater for even our local community. The human-animal relationship dates far back into world history. Before the written word there were records and evidence of the important roles animals played in the lives of humans. Citing the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Chinese, Walsh (2009, p. 463) described that through either agricultural roles, acting as protectors, or simply being companions, animals have long been part of our society and human lives. As odd as it sounds, animal rights developed in 1866 were actually used to “prosecute cases of child abuse before child protection laws were written” (New York Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children as cited by Walsh, 2009). When it comes to pet therapy, there are many potential clients and well supported reasons for choosing pet therapy. Pitts (2005) stated that the positive effects of animal interactions have occurred for many years but have only recently been documented in medical literature for about fifty years.

Of these benefits, Blue (1986) described clients of animal therapy to experience “love, attachment and comfort; sensori-motor and nonverbal learning; responsibility, nurturance and sense of competence; learning about life, death, and grief; therapeutic benefits to psychological and physical health; nurturing, humaneness, ecological awareness and ethical responsibility” (Pitts, 2005, p. 38). Pitts also explained that pet therapy can play an essential role for children with special needs such as PDD, communication challenges, and autism. Through acting as a “transitional object” the animals can be with whom the children first develop relationships which can then be transferred more easily to human interactions (Pitts, 2005, p. 39). Pattnaik (2004-2005) also supports this idea that therapy animals can serve as ‘transitional objects’ and cited Levinson (1980) stating that they can “link the child’s inner self with the outside world” which helps “reduce stresses and anxieties” (p. 96). These therapy animals can truly serve as a building block for students that face challenges with social situations, relationships, behaviors, and emotional regulation.

Another reason animal and human clients work so well together in therapeutic relationships is due to the uniqueness of every human and every animal trained for therapeutic programs. Everyone relates differently to one another and it therefore takes special animals to be able to participate in therapy situations. Katz (2003) explained how biological anthropologists “have found that dogs demonstrate an uncanny ability…to read human cues and behavior” (Walsh, 2009, p. 268-269). Just as animals have incredible strengths and intelligences, humans too have their own surprises. Temple Grandin, a woman with autism, was able to understand animals at a deeper level than most and consequently fell into a career of animal advocacy and leadership (Walsh, 2009, p. 471). Whether it is a unique ability or just an adoration of animals, humans and animals benefit greatly from one another for a multitude of reasons and unique characteristics of both parties.

There are however, many concerns and issues to sort out when beginning any form of animal therapy in a health care or educational setting. Common concerns are allergies, disease, infection, insurance, and safety. With this comes the understanding that informed consent should be acquired from participating clients and their guardians, depending upon client age. Even with consent and signed releases, due to the unpredictability of some situations or environmental factors, participants must be
aware that sessions might look different depending upon the day. Just like people, if an animal is not feeling well or is overly stressed, their performance will be impacted. The ability of the handlers to read their dog’s behavior as well as environmental cues is critical. Additionally, the handlers must be able to communicate these observations and needs to maintain safety and positive interactions between clients, animals, and handlers. Therefore respect and understanding must be agreed upon by all parties.

Therapy Dogs of Vermont is another organization that is highly recognized and maintains their dogs’ insurance through frequent testing and evaluations by agency officers. This organization, with dogs and handlers right here in our own community, works tirelessly to ensure their insured dogs and handlers are assessed in a variety of settings and with an array of clients before being awarded the title of ‘therapy dog’. Therapy Dogs of Vermont visit hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, correctional facilities, shelters, libraries, schools, and youth centers. The organization began with a man named Steve Reiman. He felt dogs had healing abilities and worked to gain access for his dog to a local hospital. He was given permission to bring his dog into Fletcher Allen Hospital in Burlington in 1990. With the success of these visits, Steve founded Therapy Dogs of Vermont two years later. Since that time, the nonprofit organization has only grown and has been recognized by medical directors across Vermont and even featured on Oprah’s Big Give in 2008. Vermont is lucky to have this organization as they stay on top of policies and issues surrounding canine therapy and they are responsive to emerging health care issues and facility requirements. Therapy Dogs of Vermont is an organization composed of a team of expert advisors, including veterinarians, dog behaviorists, and health care professionals. These caring individuals ensure a rigorous testing and certification process for dogs and their handlers. As a result, Therapy Dogs of Vermont has produced incredible therapy dogs and handlers that are available right here in Franklin County.

Living in Georgia, Vermont, Sherri Bushee and her German Shepherd Holland are one of these incredible therapy dog/handler teams. After Sherri and a teacher from Soar Learning Center met at pet store in the fall of 2009, an idea was born to bring therapy dogs to school. As the teacher worked to complete her master’s degree in education, she realized that this would make a perfect, applicable practicum project. After much research around pet therapy and animals in school, a very supportive literature review was written. The next step was the proposal. As Soar Learning Center is part of Northwestern Counseling and Support Services, it was not just the school administrators that needed knowledge of this project. With the school and agency leaders on board, families and students were then notified of the project. Once consent was received, students in the Back to School program began discussing and preparing for the first visit with Holland. Much learning occurred prior to the first visit around why Holland was a therapy dog, why students were looking forward to her visit, why our own pets at home are important to us, and also what our personal responsibilities were to be able to participate in the visit.

During the first visit, students took quickly not only to Holland but to Sherri as well. Sherri worked to get to know and understand the students. She communicated with the teacher prior to the visit to tailor the time to the needs of the students. During the visit she checked in with students and allowed them each one on one time to pet and get kisses from Holland. Since that first visit, students continue to look forward to our almost monthly visit from Sherri and Holland. Several students look forward to these visits simply for the wet kisses so they can wipe their faces and pretend they didn’t just enjoy getting slobbered. Others just enjoy watching Holland show off her amazing obedience training. This is particularly impressive since Holland has been trained and understands commands in German. The students see this and are amazed that a dog can hear a single word, lay down, and remain in that position.
and location until Sherri gives another command. The reflection and discussions that come from these visits are extraordinary. A moment that will forever be in the memory of Sherri and staff within the Back to School program occurred during the first visit. A typically introverted student had knelt down for his time to pet and get kisses from Holland and began talking about a dog he had. He then explained that his dog had since passed away. Everyone was quiet and respectful but one peer reached down and just gently patted this student’s back. The empathy was moving and to this day reminds staff of the powerful impact Holland brings.

A little more than a year after Sherri and this teacher met in that pet store, WCAX recently visited the Back to School program at Soar Learning Center. Working on an ‘Everything Animals’ segment, WCAX took an interest in Therapy Dogs of Vermont. One of the reporters contacted Sherri as she is one of the officers for the organization. They informed her that they wanted to film a segment with her and Holland. She knew right away where the segment would be filmed. The teacher went to the same directors and leaders within Soar Learning Center and NCSS, acquired consent from families, and on December 10th there was a reporter and camera man in the Back to School Classroom. Students presented Holland and Sherri with stockings that held a bone inside and message of thanks to Holland on the front. Students wrote about the excitement and happiness they received from petting, getting kisses, and watching Holland do tricks. They smiled and laughed as though a camera was not three feet away from them. The visit may have been one of the best yet. Although students were certainly looking forward to seeing themselves on television, the question of most importance was ‘when is Holland’s next visit?’

While the research supports that pet therapy holds many potential benefits for clients of all ages and in a variety of settings, seeing it and feeling it is the best proof. The human-animal relationship has a long history that should continue to build and become stronger. Throughout the course of many years, the therapeutic role of animals has become more formalized and medically recognized. When precautions are taken, trusted agencies and organizations accessed, and consent acquired, animal assisted therapy can be very successful for children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly. The Back to School program at Soar Learning Center would certainly agree with this, and they know that when a dog goes to school, it is going to be a good day.

References