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The rare therapy llama helps children learn to trust, build relationships

By Jacques Von Lunen, Special to The Oregonian...
 April 13, 2010, 4:54AM

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Student Tyler Rice visits with Rojo, one of just 14 certified therapy llamas in the country.

A llama is more than just a pretty face.

If you attended the Boutiques Unleashed fashion show Friday -- or in the last couple of years, for that matter -- you'd be forgiven for thinking llamas just strut the runway in designer clothes.

But Smokey, who hobnobbed with the glitterati last week, and Rojo, his pasture mate and star of past years' runway shows, have serious day jobs.

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They are certified therapy llamas.

Camelids -- llamas are cousins of the humpbacked desert beasts -- are rare in the therapy business. The occasional cat notwithstanding, most therapy animals are of the species **Canis lupus familiaris** (dogs to you).

Nationwide, only 14 llamas are registered with the **Delta Society**, a Washington nonprofit that certifies therapy animals around the country. That number includes Rojo and Smokey, which are card-carrying members of Delta and the **DoveLewis Animal Assisted Therapy** and Education program.

There's a reason so few of the estimated 100,000 llamas living in the U.S. are in this field. The right llama, however, is in a unique position to reach out to humans in need of positive reinforcement.

Especially when it's wearing bunny ears.

Last Wednesday, Lori Gregory and her daughter, Shannon, readied Rojo for his bimonthly visit to the **Serendipity Center**, a school in Southeast Portland that provides specialized education and treatment services for children.

They slipped a floral garland around his neck, fastened an oversized cottontail on his rump and, yes, attached bunny ears to his halter.

"DoveLewis does not encourage decorating the therapy animals," Lori Gregory said, with an apologetic nod toward Rojo. "But we find the kids are less afraid to approach him this way."

That strategy bore out a few minutes later when Rojo, in the school's courtyard, received his first students of the day. Some of them had met him many times before. They nestled their faces in his woolly hair and slung their arms around his long neck without hesitation.

But one little girl entered the area with uncertainty. This was her first time coming face to face with a llama. After a slow introduction by Gregory and a teacher, she agreed to let Rojo pick a baby carrot out of her palm with his soft lips.

Moments later, the little girl in the pink jacket was leading the gentle giant around the yard on a leash, laughing, talking to her new friend.

That scene repeated in different versions over the next two hours

A shy, serious boy, who averted his gaze when spoken to and made nervous little motions with his hands when not spoken to, broke out in a smile while circling the yard with leash in hand. The smile faded as he passed the leash. Another boy commented on the warmth of Rojo's body and then said: "You make my heart warm."

After several rounds of students visited Rojo in the courtyard, Gregory led him inside the building, to the "communication room." The children waiting for him there were classified as having trouble communicating or being on the autism spectrum.

Several of the kids cleared out quickly, but one little girl stuck around. She dug her hands into Rojo's fur and hugged the animal towering over her. Her verbal skills appeared to be far below those of other children her size. But she did say, "You're funny" to Rojo, although she didn't need to. The huge smile on her face expressed her feelings perfectly.

A few months earlier, that same girl hid behind a chair when she first saw

Rojo.

This evolution of trust is the key benefit of having such a big therapy animal come to the school, says the school's treatment director, Jackie Trussell.

"The idea is that the children develop a relationship by offering care and nurture," she says. "Now the kids say, 'Rojo knows when I'm sad.'"

There are advantages to having a llama come to the school, rather than a dog.

Some children are afraid of dogs because of bad experiences. A llama, while strange and large, is a blank slate.

Many of the children here have gone through trauma such as abuse, neglect or domestic violence, Trussell says. "They have a lot of anxiety. A lot of anxiety."

To have this 380-pound animal come to them on a consistent basis, and to realize that he's just "a big shlub, a gentle giant," Trussell says, builds trust, a rare commodity for these children.

The impact is visible, says Meghan Gipson, a teacher at the school. The children's behavior changes, at least on the days they know he's coming to visit.

"The hyperactive kids have to be calm around this huge animal," she says. Around humans, hyperactive children might not be able to rein themselves in, even if asked or encouraged to do so. But Rojo's looming presence, combined with their desire to make the experience enjoyable for him so that he'll return, calms them.

And for children on the autism spectrum or others who don't incorporate much verbal communication into their days, Rojo has been a great help, Gipson says.

"They got really excited when Rojo started coming, and they started talking about Rojo," she says.

Very few llamas are as patient and calm as Rojo. Most llamas would jump and kick if a person -- let alone a group of excited children -- touched their legs or their sides, Gregory says.

But Rojo was different, even at an early age. Lori Gregory was basically looking for an animal to keep the grass short on her property in 2002. Soon, she realized that Rojo was following her daughter, Shannon, around the pasture, looking for her company.

Shannon Gregory entered 4-H competitions with the llama, where someone noticed Rojo's demeanor and suggested getting him certified as a therapy animal. After going through the same tests and training as dogs, mother, daughter and llama became a certified team in 2007. They've added one more therapy llama since and are training a third.

-- Jacques Von Lunen

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