

## CONNIE RICHARDS, FOUNDER

Around 1995, Faithful Paws Pet Therapy Founder, Connie Richards, was riding her horse with her two-year-old son sitting in front of her in the saddle. The horse got too close to a mailbox, and the mailbox ripped off the post and got stuck to her jeans. The horse took off at a full gallop. Being an experienced rider, Connie kept repeating to herself “the safest place is on the horse”, “the safest place is on the horse”. They galloped through a country road and then through a ditch because the horse was so frightened it was clearly not going to stop! The horse galloped up to a house with a wooden front porch. She saw the opportunity to get her son safely off the horse and onto the porch. The horse galloped on before she could dismount, knocking her backwards and causing her to fall off the horse. She hit her head on the porch and was unconscious for 20 minutes. She was taken by ambulance to the hospital where it took a surgeon 3.5 hours to stitch her head. The doctor was very clear that she was incredibly lucky to be alive.

Connie was immensely thankful that her son was unharmed, but this experience also ignited a fire in her heart. She began asking God: “What is my purpose in life, why am I still alive, when I really should not have survived that fall?” She knew that God doesn’t always answer immediately and instead she experienced that God permitted this question to swirl around her heart.

Connie’s church was looking for different ministries to start and she said “what about a pet therapy group?” It felt like it was a surreal experience as it was a sudden impulse that was clearly inspired by God. Training classes after that and formed a group of six founding members. Memorial Hermann Southwest Hospital was the first place Faithful Paws Pet Therapy visited, at a time when pet therapy was new and somewhat controversial. Connie fell in love with how pet therapy visits enriched the lives of the people and knew immediately that pet therapy would be a good ministry.

Connie had found a new purpose in her life and had embraced a new life motto: “to touch as many people in a positive way so that they feel compelled to pay it forward”.

In 1997 visits to hospitals were groundbreaking. Pet therapy was an innovative approach and had to be approved and carefully scrutinized by the Infectious Disease departments of each hospital. The truth of the benefit, however, was in observing the reactions of patients, their families and staff. Everyone opened their arms and hearts to the dogs, and the Faithful Paws mission was spread by word of mouth.

On one of the first visits, a nurse pointed out a man who was sleeping in a wheelchair in a common area. He had severe arthritis. They encouraged us to wake him up so he could see the dogs. Connie's Sheltie, Buck, was put on the tray on his wheelchair so when he woke up he saw the dog and grinned ear to ear! Buck was a true therapy dog that day and accepted the love the man gave. Despite the man having severe arthritis and not being able to unfold his hand to pet Buck, he pounded him with his fists, and Buck knew it was the best the man could do and loved him anyway. The nurses were thrilled to see the man interacting with the dog and how patient the dog was with the man's "petting". What made our visits successful then is what still makes them successful today: innovative and loving care, individualized and appropriate to each unique situation, and sometimes with a bit of inspiration from the nursing staff.

**Connie's favorite story:** I was visiting a hospital and came across a room where I knew someone was clearly very ill. When I entered the room and asked if they would like my Sheltie, Ruthie, on the bed with them, a weak voice said "yes! I placed Ruthie in the crook of the patient's arms, and the dog immediately put her head over the lady's chest, which was an unusual thing for Ruthie to do! At that point, I was quiet and watched my dog having a special moment, perhaps a silent conversation with the patient. After about 10 minutes, the patient looked at me and said "I don't know if I have 2 months, 2 weeks or 2 days to live. You see, I have brain cancer." I sat there in silence and watched my dog do her pet therapy work. This is why I continue to do what I do. I'm so grateful to that patient for the encouragement and to my Sheltie for knowing exactly what to say!

Retiring after 25 years of service in 2023 and handing over the reins to Lynn Morris, everyone agrees that Connie has shown us how to live with purpose. In 2023, Faithful Paws had over 200 teams and visits over 150 facilities in the Houston area, logging over 15,000 visits for the year and impacting countless lives.