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Kids, Pets & Family

Celebrate a decade of the Scott Family Amazeum, enjoy a day of fun at Play Street Museum, learn what's new at the Tulsa Zoo and meet local therapy dogs

also:

Arkansas Children's Northwest highlights the resilience of this year's Will Golf 4 Kids and Gala of Hope Champion Child

More Than Pets

By Lawrence Elizabeth Knox

▼ Niko and Dr. Bradley Crossfield

It's no secret that dogs are man's best friend. For thousands of years, canines have been our loyal companions, offering unconditional love that enhances our health and well-being. Many dogs find purpose in having a job, and with the right training and temperament, they can have a significantly positive impact on the lives of the humans around them, providing comfort, managing stress, fostering healing and unleashing smiles. Meet three local therapy dogs who live this mission daily in their work with children.



Niko at Tooth Squad Pediatric Dentistry

A young boy on the autism spectrum sat in the dental chair, nervously awaiting a filling at Tooth Squad Pediatric Dentistry. Due to his heightened anxiety, completing the procedure was feeling more unattainable by the minute — that is, until Niko approached.

The 3-year-old Hungarian Vizsla proved a calm and comforting companion, his velvety ears distracting the child long enough for Dr. Bradley Crossfield to finish the task at hand.

An Arkansas native and University of Arkansas alum, Crossfield returned to his home state after completing his pediatric dental residency and launched his practice in 2020. From routine exams and extractions to fitting mouthguards, correcting tongue-ties and more, he tailors every appointment to his patient's developmental stage, allowing kids to feel confident about their oral health and diminishing any dental anxiety, with the help of his furry sidekick.

Following in the paw prints of his big brother, a German Shorthaired Pointer named Colt, Niko became a certified therapy dog last year through Pet Partners, and he's been making children feel safe during their dental visits — not to mention, boosting team morale — ever since.

"It's incredible what a wagging tail and a few puppy cuddles can do," Crossfield said. "Niko brings comfort, calmness, and a whole lot of smiles to patients and parents alike. He's always up for a pet, a snuggle or even a high-five, paws permitting. Whether he's easing nerves in the operatory or soaking up attention in the break room, he's an irreplaceable part of the Tooth Squad family." (Photos courtesy of Tooth Squad Pediatric Dentistry)

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Cramer at the Children’s Safety Center of Washington County

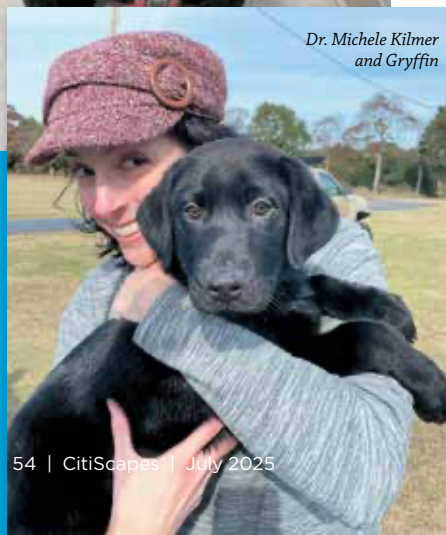
The Children’s Safety Center of Washington County added a new teammate to its roster a little over two years ago. Cramer, officially designated as the director of snuggles, is a 3-year-old Aussiedoodle with expressive eyes, a friendly disposition and a very busy schedule.

Since 1997, the nonprofit organization has empowered children to overcome abuse and begin to trust, hope, and heal by providing advocacy, forensic interviews, medical evaluations, therapy and prevention training. As supporters of the Children’s Safety Center, the Berna family — who owns multiple funeral homes across Northwest Arkansas and sees the benefits of certified grief therapy dogs firsthand — wanted the children to have access to a furry friend, so they initiated the conversation with Ultimate Canine, a dog training academy in Indiana. Cramer’s primary handler is Karen Blackstone, a

forensic interviewer and MDT coordinator who has worked at the Children’s Safety Center since its founding.

Most children request to see Cramer as soon as they walk through the doors of the Springdale facility, and his primary responsibility is to be ready. On a day-to-day basis, he greets those arriving for their initial interviews and attends therapy sessions, where his presence alone often encourages timid children to open up and share their stories.

“We had a girl recently say, ‘I think God put Cramer at the center so he could show kids what love is,’” said Peyton Stewman, the organization’s marketing strategist. “He’s just a dog, but somehow dogs have this power to connect with kids, and he’s there to be comfort for them in whatever way they need.” (Photos courtesy of the Children’s Safety Center of Washington County)



Dr. Michele Kilmer and Gryffin

Gryffin at Access for Autism at the University of Arkansas

When her now 24-year-old son was 9 months old, Dr. Michele Kilmer, a certified pediatric nurse practitioner and assistant professor at the University of Arkansas’ Eleanor Mann School of Nursing, knew he had autism. Still, it took 11 years to receive a diagnosis, and even then, they were left with no support. The Access for Autism (A4A) program, which she established at the U of A in 2021, grew out of her desire to collaborate with primary care providers to facilitate the diagnostic process, conduct research studies, improve health outcomes and increase access.

Witnessing her son’s bond with their family dog, Kilmer began to wonder, “Could we train a dog to do the same service dog task but with a lot of children?” That’s when Dr. Gryffin Padfoot came along.

A certified therapy and service dog, the 3-year-old black Labrador Retriever, bearing a Harry Potter-inspired name,

is an integral part of the A4A team. For each animal-assisted study, Kilmer looks at pro-social behavior and emotional regulation experienced by children up to age 18 in the session and apart from it for eight to 12 weeks. These studies have proven a cumulative effect, in that the children who see Gryffin experience continuous improvement and display greater self-esteem.

“I never thought Gryffin would have the ability to cause such a big change in these kids’ behaviors,” Kilmer said of her fur baby, who knows 70 commands and loves to play hide-and-seek and soccer.

He is also trained to detect anxiety and alerts Kilmer by laying at the participant’s feet. She can then walk the child through a full-body scan, teaching them what nervousness feels like. “Therapy dogs can do so much more than be petted,” she said. “Don’t underestimate the power of a good canine.” (Photos courtesy of Access for Autism)

Want to Get Involved?



Helping Paws of NWA is a group of registered therapy animal teams with a membership base that includes certification entities such as Love on a Leash, Pet Partners, Alliance of Therapy Dogs and Therapy Dogs International. Locally, these volunteer teams visit places such as Arkansas Children's Northwest, Northwest Arkansas National Airport, Washington Regional Medical Center, Northwest Arkansas Children's Shelter, public libraries and more. There is a constant need for more pet therapy teams in the area to fill the number of requests these therapy animal organizations receive. Check out each entity's website to review the requirements for becoming involved. ■



Ginger Spiller

APRN, FNP-C, founder of Our Functional Wellness Clinic

ABOUT US

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