

Connemara therapy pony makes a visit to the nursing home

By Vickie J. Maris, Savannah's human

Serendipity's Savannah (Sire – Oak Hills Country Song; Dam – Oak Hills Maggie) represented the Connemara breed proudly when she served as a therapy pony in St. Anthony's Healthcare Center on Dec. 11, 2007, Lafayette, Ind. Therapy pony is just one of many roles that Savannah has served for Dawn of Promise Farm where she has lived since her yearling year.

She is now 13 years old, has produced four foals by Kerrymor Madison, competed successfully in combined tests, USDF dressage shows at training level, jumper classes, and has been the favorite lesson pony of many of my young riding students. But all of this seemed to pale in comparison when she stepped through the back dock entrance of a nursing home onto tile floors most ponies would consider slick, and followed me through the hallways to visit the residents.

The day was cold and rainy and seemed to me to be an Irish blessing of the event about to unfold. I had wrapped Savannah's hooves in Vetrap® and a little duct tape to keep her from slipping. Her first potential obstacles were the shouts of the kitchen workers who stepped out in the hall to discard things in the trash only to scream when they saw a "real horse" in their hallway.

Savvy has experienced many shouts of delight in her day since she is most often used for the very tiny riders of ages 3 – 5. Little did I know that those exuberant children were preparing her for days of pet therapy with senior citizens!

My late father, Jim Maris, had been living at St. Anthony's during the fall and was the first to meet us in the hallway that day. He was anxiously awaiting our arrival with my mom, Lucille. Savannah gave him several kisses of greeting and we set out on our tour. Dad was rolling along behind serving as Savannah's personal PR person. The staff of the nursing home were incredibly accommodating and helpful. The activities director, who had arranged the event, carried the muck bucket and shovel – just in case. The nurses and assistants checked with residents to ask if they'd like a visit from a pony and then helped accommodate all who were excited to meet Savannah. One lovely woman who was about to turn 105 expressed, "Ooohhh! Savannah, you are the best present I've ever had! I've never touched a real horse until today!" Another woman openly wept with joy. She couldn't speak, but we all sensed that Savannah was making her day! I later learned that she had grown up on a horse farm. Her tears of joy were the most reaction the staff had seen from her since she had arrived.

Ponies are equipped with such wonderful intuition and Savannah was using every bit of hers to determine if she needed to kiss someone on the cheek or stand quietly while a resident tried to negotiate getting a hand out to pet her. Some residents did not have the coordination to stroke her gently, so she patiently tolerated anyone who grabbed her halter, nostril, ear, and on a couple occasions, tail, while I was looking towards her head.

I knew from Savannah's outing to represent Connemaras at the Hoosier Horse Fair, that she was not one to worry about crowds and equipment. This was a good thing, as she was approached several times by people in wheelchairs or on walkers and was even surrounded on one occasion by about four residents in wheelchairs before we could get

everyone rolled back a bit. She never flinched at wheelchairs, never flicked an ear at alarms going off or at the screeches of delight from residents and staff. In true pony style, she did try to taste the fake Christmas tree at one of the nurse's stations.

Savannah brought tears to my own eyes as she adjusted the height of her head and her level of activity for each resident depending on their ability and interest. She watched carefully where she placed her feet and would glance behind before I would turn her 180 degrees to head back towards someone calling out for her. She even went into resident rooms to greet those who were bedridden. This required that she enter the doorway and pass the restroom where the hallway was just slightly wider than her well-fed Connemara frame. She would stand quietly at the foot of a resident's bed and wait for them to reach for her. That seemed to be her clue as to which of the two residents had requested her (and it was sometimes both). So she would then stretch her neck up from the foot of the bed and hold herself in a somewhat awkward position to be petted and loved on or shown a stuffed animal. When the visit was over, she, at my request, would quietly back out of the room, one careful step at a time. My mom told me later that she just couldn't believe it all and that she wanted to share motherly words of caution, but stopped herself. "As I watched you and Savannah working together, I knew that it was a moment I didn't need to interrupt. That connection between the two of you is amazing. I could tell that if something wasn't going to be right, Savannah would have told you and you would have listened."

Savannah's unflappable demeanor was perfect for this environment. I always have thought Connemaras were the perfect pony, but dear Savannah, has once again confirmed it! In addition to her good-natured Irish genes, I was grateful for the natural horsemanship training I've received alongside Savannah from Megan Doyle and Sherry Beuttner plus the myriad of goofy activities that Savannah and I have done in the past that prepared us for this. One example is the day I arranged for her to be on display in the local feed store promoting a pony program I had going on at the time.

I feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to share Savannah with my Dad and the other residents of St. Anthony's. Dad's health took a turn for the worse only four days later and he was moved to the hospital. He went to be with the Lord on Jan. 9, 2008. In his last month, Dad, Mom and I had the joy of being able to talk and laugh about Savannah's visit to St. Anthony's and how she surprised and brought joy to so many people. When Dad died, he had his bride of 65 years keeping watch at his bedside and two photos on his bed table. One was a photo of Savannah.

I look forward to facilitating Savannah's ability to share joy in nursing homes in the future. I have started reading my book from the Delta Society to prepare the two of us for certification in pet assisted therapy.