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# Nurse, Dog In Step With Patients

## South Jersey Healthcare Rn Honored As National Cherokee Award Winner

Samantha Abate, RN, BS, CCRN, is an ardent dog lover.

Her 7 1/2-year-old rescued racing greyhound, Gypsy, is a people lover.

Together, the duo has made a big impact on patients and nursing care at South Jersey Healthcare in Vineland, N.J.

Gypsy had worked regularly with kids in a reading program and with the elderly in local nursing homes.

"I've seen the dog make such an impact," said Abate, the assistant nurse manager of the cardiac ICU and cardiac step-down units.

After reading a study done at UCLA in which patients with pulmonary artery catheters saw greater benefits after a visit from a therapy dog than a human volunteer, Abate had an idea to take that research even further.

"In the hospital, patients don't like to walk," she said. "We know that walking is good for heart failure [patients], and we know that pet therapy is good for heart failure from the UCLA study. So we could take the best of both worlds and have them walk with the dog."

Abate presented her idea at SJH and "the support I got was incredible. It wasn't just allowed, it was embraced. They could've looked at me and said, 'No way we're letting the dog in our hospital.'"

Her recently completed study, which began in 2009, led to a research paper that is scheduled to be published in the Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing.

It also led to Abate being honored Oct. 19 by Cherokee Uniforms as the national Grand Prize Winner of the 2010 Cherokee Inspired Comfort Award.

"Everybody knew [about the award] for a month but me," said Abate, who was called to a fake meeting last month while her co-workers set up for a celebration. On her way back to the unit after the meeting was called off, "I got off the elevator and there was cake and screaming."

Some of the heart failure patients studied were surprised at first by their walking partner before Abate explained Gypsy's racing career, which included zero victories.

"Some of the patients say, 'I'm gonna walk with a racing dog?'" Abate said with a laugh. "She never won a race, so an oxygen tank walker is more her speed. It chokes me up sometimes to think she never won a race, and now here she is changing the world. She walks in here like she's a rock star."

Even since the study has ended, Gypsy continues to walk with patients. Abate said she hopes to reprise the study for a different patient population.

"There's hardly a patient in the hospital that can't benefit from ambulating," she said.

While the snow is falling this winter in the Greater Philadelphia Tri-State region, Abate plans to take an all-

expense-paid Caribbean cruise, which was part of her prize package from Cherokee.

Meanwhile, she continues to share her story with other nurses. She recently presented at SJH's research conference and encourages colleagues to push the envelope for patient care.

"If you have a crazy idea, you should go with it," Abate said. "If there's no evidence base, you can create one. If I had said I want to bring my dog to work for the heart failure patients and someone said, 'Well, show me the evidence.' There was none. But now there is.

"I knew that it wasn't dangerous," she said. "It's not normal. It's just a little bit outside of the box."

Thanks to the program's success, Abate said she has a long list of e-mails from healthcare professionals who want to use the findings in her upcoming journal article in their own practice settings.

She also has more than a few moments of wonder.

"Every once in a while, I get these little flashes and think, 'How did this happen?'"

*Barry Bottino is a regional editor for Nursing Spectrum.*

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