

# GIVING

## NONPROFIT ANNIVERSARY

# Paws & Hearts celebrates quarter century of animal-assisted therapy

**Richard Waxman**

Special to The Desert Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

It was 25 years ago today, Dec. 1, 1999, that Paws & Hearts Animal Assisted Therapy received its 501(c)(3) nonprofit classification. At the time, I never dreamed the organization would have grown like it has and become such a vital contributor to the health and wellness of seniors in our valley.

What started out with a little stray poodle/terrier named Lucky and an invitation to visit the residents at Valencia Palms in Indio has turned into an amazing journey.

I was so overwhelmed with Lucky's ability to connect with patients that I called The Desert Sun and asked if they were interested in a cute story. As luck would have it, their feature story for the then Desert People section had been pulled, and they were frantically looking for a replacement. They asked if they could come and observe a visit and take pictures the very next day.

Their story put us on the map. We received more calls than I could have imagined.

Lucky and I made presentations to all the long-term care facilities, asking if they would be interested in having a weekly pet therapy visit from a dog. The response was overwhelmingly "yes," so I set out to recruit and train volunteers, both human and canine.

In no way did I do this all alone. My then boyfriend, Phillip Valdez, said we needed a proper office, and together we found a \$400-per-month space in Palm Desert. Phillip contributed half the rent



Two- and four-legged volunteers pose with Santa in 2023.

for years, and his kindness and generosity really keep me going in the beginning.

One day I walked a young woman by the name of Valerie Zugates, who said: "I hear you're looking for a bookkeeper. I'm happy to offer my assistance as a donation." This angel not only did our books but handled our website.

A few years after that, my path collided with Drew Marefos, who was a re-

tired Chevron executive looking for a way to give back to the community. After one visit observing Lucky and Scruffy at Eisenhower, I found him crying in the parking lot. He couldn't believe how two dogs could make people so happy. He offered to do whatever I needed. For almost 16 years he did everything from training volunteers, going on visits with my two dogs and attending board meetings and presentations.



Paws & Hearts founder Richard Waxman poses with Scruffy, Lucky and Teresa Whipple, executive director of the Desert Care Network's Comprehensive Cancer Center. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PAWS & HEARTS

He truly became my right-hand man.

Sadly, both Valerie the angel and Drew the assistant died last year. What a void they have left in my little organization. I am heartbroken that they are no longer around to see us celebrate this 25-year milestone, which they worked so hard for.

We've had some of the most amazing volunteers over the years, both four- and two-legged. I have to thank Ginny Tillmannshofer, board president emeritus, who has just retired from serving on the board for nearly 20 years. For those of you who attended our annual dog walk fundraisers, those beautiful gift baskets and that raffle were all her doing.

Nine years ago, we introduced our

**See PAWS & HEARTS, Page 11D**



**Bingo and Maddie enjoy a Halloween visit in 2019.**



**Former Paws & Hearts board member Ginny Tillmannshofer with Chloe.**



**Phillip Valdez, an original supporter of Paws & Hearts, poses with Lucky.**



**Drew Marefos and Richard Waxman**

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PAWS & HEARTS

## Paws & Hearts

Continued from Page 12D

monthly pet loss bereavement group, which is open to anyone in the valley who has lost a beloved dog or cat and needs a bit of guidance in how to move the grieving process along.

We are always looking for volunteers and all the information on our program can be found at [pawsandhearts.org](http://pawsandhearts.org).

We have retired our yearly dog walk, and this year we are holding our very first Santa Paws at Paws & Hearts event. Think Santa sitting in his chair, just waiting for you to have your pup's photo taken with him. Loving All Animals will have a holiday booth set up with dogs

available for adoption and representatives from the new veterinary urgent care will be on hand passing out information about their services.

Santa Paws will take place Dec. 7 between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. at our office in the Berger Foundation Building, 42-600 Cook Street in Palm Desert. This event is free, but donations are always appreciated.

These last 24 years have been the most rewarding chapter of my life. I often think I got more out of those visits with Lucky, Scruffy, Maddie and Bingo than the patients we visited.

To learn more, visit [pawsandhearts.org](http://pawsandhearts.org).

*Richard Waxman is the founder and executive director of Paws & Hearts Animal Assisted Therapy.*