

Barking Up the “Right” Tree

Blimey! The queen of England has *nothing* on Excelsa’s patients, families and staff. Famous for being the breed closely associated with Elizabeth II, the Pembroke Welsh corgi, which originated in Pembrokeshire, Wales, was historically used to herd cattle because of its size. At about 10-12 inches high, these energetic dogs could nip at the livestock’s heels yet avoid being kicked. In fact, Queen Elizabeth II has owned more than 30 corgis during her reign. One of the two that shot to international fame during the 2012 London Olympics has the same name as Westmoreland Hospital’s first-floor favorite, Willow.

Excelsa’s Willow, named for Kenneth Grahame’s children’s classic, *The Wind in the Willows*, and her owner, Pam Smith, a retired elementary teacher and reading specialist from the Yough School District, frequent 1D and 1E every other Friday afternoon. One look at Willow’s sweet face, with her always-at-alert ears, is sure to bring smiles to all she encounters—something that brings Pam pleasure in much the same way as her 39 years in teaching did.

Like others of this eager-to-learn, active, dock-tailed breed, Willow knows a trick or two. In fact, she and her brother Kyle, a Cardigan Welsh corgi, have earned badges for certain skills as part of the “Dog Scouts of America” program, whose motto is, “Let us learn new things that we may become more helpful.” Every summer Pam, Willow and Kyle are off to camp, and the six-year-old’s sash holds badges for endeavors such as “All Dog Band,” “K-9 Fitness” and “Tricks 101” to name a few. Sometimes, as with “Stand Up Paddle Boarding,” it is as challenging for the owner as for the dog.

In fact, over the past several summers, Willow has earned more than 20 new badges. Pam may even have another Picasso on her hands if Willow continues using her paws to paint as she did to earn “Art of Shaping (Painting).” Her first rendition was titled “My First Campfire,” executed in oranges and yellows.

However, where Willow really shines is at lure coursing, a sport for dogs that involves chasing a mechanically operated lure. Though known as the “Fairy Dog of Wales,” those short legs in no way inhibit her speed, as seen by pictures of her flying around the field so fast that all four feet are in flight.

Another newer favorite for this red-and-white, short-coated pooch is barn hunt, which became an American Kennel Club (AKC)-sanctioned sport in 2013. Barn hunt involves bales of straw/hay, aerated plastic tubes, a determined dog and a rat or two. While barn hunting, Willow is expected to locate the PVC tube with the rat among a maze of bales, distinguishing it from empty tubes and tubes with litter/bedding. It tests speed, agility and surefootedness as Willow climbs onto and over the bales or tunnels through these obstacles on her path to find the “prize” ... the tube(s) with the rat.

She also used that no-nonsense nose to win the AKC’s “Tracking Dog” title in September 2016 in Hamilton, NY. Soon she will be starting to compete in obedience work.

Now exclusively visiting Excelsa, Willow had used her charms in the past as a therapy dog at area nursing homes. She has also participated in Excelsa’s summertime, Behavioral Health program, “Camp Focus.” In fact, it’s hard to tell where her true passion lies—having fun, making friends or fiercely competing—a testament to her versatility.

Still from the reactions of those on Westmoreland’s 1st floor, there really is no corgi “competition.” It’s resoundingly Willow!!! Or as the Brit’s would say, she’s the “bee’s knees!”

The Pet Therapy volunteers and their dogs are part of Excelsa Health’s efforts to enhance the patient experience.