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# McWalters' job includes a 'gentle giant'

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When [Rebecca McWalters](#) started college after years of being a stay at home mom, she wanted to be a midwife. But that all changed when she did her senior practicum at Atlanta's **Shepherd Center** seven years ago, and she's been there ever since.

McWalters now works as a nurse on Shepherd's spinal cord injury (SCI) floor, and she's also a rehabilitation nurse at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta on an as-needed basis.

"I had no idea about SCI, not until I came to Shepherd Center and started working with SCI that I knew this was an incredible place to work and I had to be part of it," she said.

Soon after McWalters graduated from the **University of West Georgia** and started working at the center as part of its staff, one of her first patients was involved with Canine Assistants in Alpharetta.

"At that point, I was extremely interested in somehow becoming involved with canine assistance," McWalters said.

But years passed, and McWalters stayed busy with her job and spending time with her husband and four children. Then one day, she saw another patient bring in a helper dog, a black lab puppy, that made every other patient on the wing light up.

"It's always in the back of your mind, and when the little black lab came on the floor, it was just like we need it. We need a dog. We need to make this happen," McWalters said.

McWalters approached the center with another employee, a physical therapist on the brain

injury floor who also wanted a canine helper and therapy dog, and the center agreed. Then she contacted Canine Companions for Independence in Orlando, Fla., which had reached out to the Shepherd Center previously about placing one of its dogs there.

McWalters said the organization immediately knew Frosty, a big white lab, was the best fit for the center. His nickname is "The Gentle Giant."

"He's calm, he's patient, he's gentle, which is great for patients on [ventilators]," McWalters said.

After a week of training in Orlando with Frosty so she could learn about what he can do, McWalters was certified to bring the dog with her to work. He was immediately a huge hit with patients during therapy sessions.

"Any kind of movement is therapy," McWalters said. "A lot of patients will work harder when petting the dog, they'll do more exercises."

Frosty can open doors with looped handles attached, including refrigerators and ovens. He can also mash the buttons to open the doors that separate ICU from other parts of the hospital and follow basic commands like "heel" and "no," but McWalters said she doesn't use these commands often because his role doesn't demand it.

"Patients just want him close by," McWalters said. "He doesn't have to do a lot of tricks."

Although McWalters originally presented the idea of a therapy dog who would help patients motor skills and hand exercises, Frosty's role evolved as the center realized his personality had a great capacity to comfort patients — even those in ICU with very limited motility.

Frosty is an official employee at the center, though he does not get paid. When he's at work, he wears his vest and a photo badge that matches the rest of Shepherds' employees. Then when work is over, the uniform comes off and he's a regular dog again.

"When I take off his vest, he knows he's not working," McWalters said. "He gets up on the couch and takes naps, he goes outside and plays with the other dogs. But when he is on his way to work, he gets very excited."

One week, the center was switching computer systems and McWalters decided to leave Frosty at home so she could focus on learning how to use the new system. She said he grew despondent and stopped eating.

"I truly believe that he understands his purpose here, because he's so good at it," she said. "And he recognizes people that just need his attention... I just let him lead me a lot of times, when it comes to visiting people."

[Mike Marshall](#), an ICU charge nurse at Shepherd Center, often takes Frosty on the floor with him when McWalters has paperwork to do.

"He's been very helpful when we've had patients that are very sick — a lot of them are missing their animals," he said.

Marshall said Frosty tends to dominate everyone's attention when McWalters brings him into a room, but he credits her just as much for their knack at patient interaction.

"Rebecca has a very soft heart, she's very loving and tender with the patients," Marshall said. "And she works with adolescents in part, which can be challenging, but she's very competent with this group of people."

Frosty's other supervisor is [Chaplain Alan Roof](#), who takes the dog with him all over the hospital to visit patients, as well as the veterans who are part of the center's SHARE Military Initiative.

"It's very comforting for them to have the dog when talking about spiritual struggles they're having," Roof said.

This month, McWalter's schedule switches from working weekdays to weekends, and that means Frosty will get to join Roof's Sunday service.

"He was here a couple of Sundays ago... he just goes from patient to patient, or he'll come up and lay down in front of me when I'm doing my sermon," he said. "One of the funnier moments was when I was talking about the importance of joy, and I looked down in the aisle and Frosty was rolling around. I said, 'this is an example of joy.'"

McWalters said she plans to keep working with Frosty at Shepherd Center as long as they can keep helping people and making them happy.

"There's no place like Shepherd," she said. "It's an incredible place, and people stay because of that uniqueness."

### [Rebecca McWalters](#)

- **Age:** 45
- **Born in:** Norfolk, Va.
- **Lives in:** Cumming
- **Current job:** Certified Rehabilitation Nurse, Shepherd Center
- **Previous job:** Stay-at-home mom
- **Education:** BSN and RN, University of West Georgia
- **Family:** Husband, [Rich](#); two sons [Rich](#), 25, and [Sheldon](#), 20; two daughters, [Emily](#), 17, and Belle, 16.

- **Hobbies:** Kids, dogs, movies

Ellie Hensley is an entertainment, health care and general assignment reporter.