



Quarterly

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Heaven Didn't Wait: A Self-Appointed Therapy Dog Finds His Flock

On May 1st a three-year-old named Duke willingly submitted to being feted and fawned over by his adopted family – that is the family he adopted, not the other way around.

Duke, a Chihuahua-Papillon mix, arrived at Mercy Circle on the morning of November 1, 2024, and as recounted by Avis Clendenen, the senior living community's director of pastoral care, "scampered in like he knew exactly where he was and where he intended to go." Both of those assessments turned out to be true, but it took a little while for the humans to catch up.

Annie Riedmuller quickly took charge. The life enrichment coordinator for residents in Baggot Street, the memory care wing at Mercy Circle, Riedmuller has a certain way with animals, leading to her lifelong reputation as a "dog whisperer." She had the pup checked for an identification chip – no such luck – and then contacted local police and posted a photo on social media. Later that day, she received a call from the dog's owner.

Duke had been brought into his previous family's life to provide a comforting presence after a house fire, which had traumatized one of the children. He did his job well. But now, with the parents at work

most days, they knew Duke needed a more stimulating environment. He already had occasionally felt the call of the open yard; this time, they weren't sure he would come back at all.

As it turns out, Mercy Circle was already looking for a dog; Duke was literally the answer to their prayers.

A few days earlier, Riedmuller and executive director Francis Lachowicz had mused about finding a therapy dog for the residents at Baggot Street. Both women were keenly aware of studies (as well as first-hand observations) that show the calming effect and pure joy that animals can bring, especially to those struggling with dementia. The conversation ended with Lachowicz saying, "Pray God sends us the perfect dog."

Duke strolled in on the evening of All Saints Day, leading Clendenen to observe: "That's when the season of All Saints/All Souls – when the veil between this

world and mystery grows thin – started working its magic." Duke has since poked his way into the daily routine at Mercy Circle, where his ministrations on Baggot Street, and throughout the community, have continued to cheer staff as well as residents. And Lachowicz gets to take the "perfect dog" home each night.

As Riedmuller commented, "You can't make this stuff up."



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