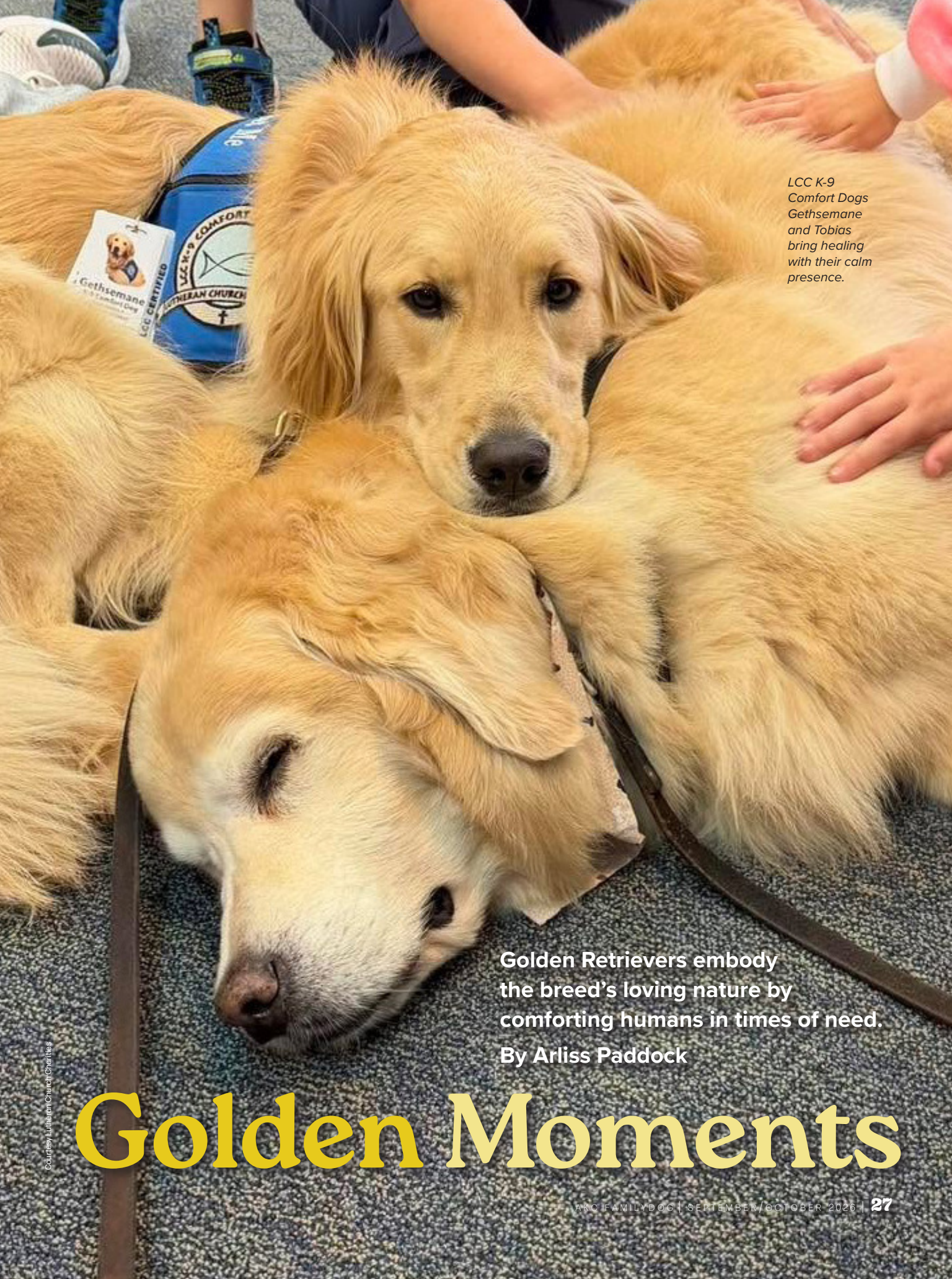




*LCC K-9
Comfort Dogs
Gethsemane
and Tobias
bring healing
with their calm
presence.*

Golden Retrievers embody
the breed's loving nature by
comforting humans in times of need.

By Arliss Paddock

Golden Moments



LCC Comfort Dog Bethesda with young friends

Look up the official description of the Golden Retriever in the AKC standard, and you'll learn that among the breed's stellar qualities are their "kindly expression" and "friendly, reliable, and trustworthy" personality. To those who have ever known a Golden, "friendly" might seem an understatement.

Most Golden Retrievers instantly adore everyone they meet, offering unconditional trust and affection to one and all, irrespective of age, walk of life, or whether the individual is a "dog person." They want nothing more than to be with you and be near you. These dogs seem to live for love.

Their desire for human connection makes Golden Retrievers wonderfully suitable to meeting a variety of people in all sorts of settings. With a wagging tail, soft, silky coat, and "smiling" expression, a Golden can provide nonjudgmental comfort by being there for a human to touch and pet, or to just quietly sit or lie beside them as a peaceful presence. Playing with the dog can also make

for a welcome distraction from difficult or scary moments. [Research](#) has shown what a powerful effect this kind of supportive interaction can bring—with a significant ability to help people through stressful or sad situations, often enhancing physical and emotional healing.

Tragic events in recent decades have brought to the fore the important ways that dogs can serve these kinds of needs and have led to refining the roles of therapy dogs. Although the value of canine therapy has long been known, it was the assistance centers set up following the 9/11 disaster—where dogs on the site provided vital relief to many responders and others affected—that demonstrated the magnitude of the impact these dogs can have.

Expert comforters in times of need

With arguably no breed more perfectly suited as natural comforters, several groups have formed around the country that focus on working mainly or exclusively with Golden Retrievers

in therapy teams that they train and deploy. One of these is the Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) [K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry](#), launched in 2008 and based in Northbrook, Illinois. With more than 100 LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs serving in 27 states, LCC describes the program as a "national human-care ministry embracing the unique, calming nature and skills of purebred Golden Retrievers." The group notes that "LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs are working animals, trained to interact with people of all ages and circumstances who are suffering and in need."

LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs are trained extensively in three facilities in Illinois and then are placed with schools, churches, and other ministries nationwide. Permanent placement includes full training for handlers and caregivers, with ongoing support and coaching. LCC serves people of all faiths, and there is no charge for their service—the program is supported by donations.

In addition to serving regularly in their own communities, LCC K-9



LCC K-9
Comfort Dog
Sharon at the
library



LCC K-9 Comfort Dog
Sharon with a veteran
before an Honor Flight
trip

teams deploy as needed to different places around the country to provide comfort at times of disaster and crisis. In recent months many Comfort Dog teams have traveled, in many cases long distances, to bring their compassionate presence to people experiencing shock

and grief, such as at schools suffering the loss of a student or teacher, as well as mobilizing to numerous areas where residents face upheaval and tragedy because of devastating fires, floods, or tornadoes. “We go where people are hurting,” says one Comfort Dog team member.

Comfort Dog teams have also traveled around the U.S. providing relief from job-related stress for people in challenging roles that serve the public such as in healthcare, law enforcement, firefighting, and the military. Teams for example have recently gone to airports

Therapy Dog, Service Dog, Emotional Support Dog—What’s the Difference?

Here are a few [guidelines](#):

- Service dogs are specially trained to perform certain tasks for an individual with a disability. This can be, for example, a guide dog who helps his blind owner navigate in the world; a hearing-alert dog who notifies her owner of sounds, such as when the phone or doorbell rings; a dog who helps his wheelchair-using owner do tasks such as picking things up and opening doors and cabinets; or a dog who alerts to her owner’s medical condition, such as seizures or diabetic crises.

- Therapy dogs, on the other hand, aren’t trained to help just one specific person. Rather, they are trained to interact with different people and to be calm and at ease in a range of environments where they provide comfort, affection, and a healing presence. Sometimes they serve in a specialized way, such as lying down quietly while a child reads to them.

- Emotional support dogs aren’t typically trained for specific tasks to aid a person with a disability; instead, they are considered companion animals whose presence eases

situations for their owner that might involve anxiety, phobias, panic attacks, or other emotional or psychological challenges.

Sometimes the differences between these roles are blurred, as in the case of [a special Golden Retriever, Syd](#). Awarded the 2025 Exemplary Companion Award for Canine Excellence, Syd was already an AKC obedience trial champion when her owner, Roberta “Bobbi” Hockenberry, had to have a leg amputated. Though Syd had not previously been trained as a service dog, she instinctively took up her new role right away, learning to assist her owner in daily tasks such as carrying crutches, retrieving dropped items, and providing her with emotional support. Syd relates to her owner on a level that’s “really almost human,” she says. “She is right there all the time.”



Syd and
Roberta
“Bobbi”
Hockenberry

to give warm send-offs to veterans participating in [Stars and Stripes Honor Flights](#) that escort WWII, Korean War, and Vietnam War vets to see their memorials in Washington, D.C.

One of the newer LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs bringing smiles and healing to many in her community is Sharon, a sweet 2-year-old Golden. Sharon arrived last year at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Federal Way, Washington, near Puget Sound. She is the second Comfort Dog in Washington, and the first in the western part of the state. Sharon received more than 2,000 hours of training in Illinois through LCC before coming out to the Pacific Northwest. She has 10 handlers and 13 ministry partners who serve with her. She is available for about two visits a day, six days a week.

Stephanie Pariseau, "top dog" of Sharon's Comfort Dog team, explains:

"Currently, Sharon has a weekly schedule that includes schools, pre-schools, senior living centers and homes, hospitals, a food bank, FUSION transitional housing, a juvenile court and detention center, and community events. Sharon can also be called to go on deployment with other LCC dogs when tragedy strikes. We can go anywhere we are invited to offer comfort to those who are hurting, scared, lonely, or in need of her calming presence."

For those interested in following her journey, Sharon has a social media presence on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

Rescued Goldens healing hearts

[Golden Retriever Rescue of Mid-Florida](#) (GRRMF) began in 1991 when two members of the Mid-Florida Golden Retriever Club stepped up to help a Golden Retriever in need of major hip surgery. More than 30 years later, the all-volunteer organization has rescued and rehomed thousands of Goldens across mid-Florida—and now also runs an extensive therapy program,

One student who hadn't spoken to anyone else during the school year found her voice through reading to Madison. Their bond demonstrated the unique ability of therapy dogs to create a safe, accepting space.



appropriately named Hearts of Gold.

"The GRRMF Hearts of Gold Therapy Program is unique in that it extends the community service mission of our rescue organization," says GRRMF Hearts of Gold program coordinator Ginger Vincent. "We launched in 2019 with 28 therapy teams and finished our first year with 35 therapy visits. Today, Hearts of Gold has grown to more than 220 active handler teams serving their communities in Jacksonville, Gainesville, The Villages, Palm Coast, Melbourne, Orlando, and Clearwater/Tampa. On average we impact 14,000 people every month, and we finished 2025 with 4,116 therapy visits."

Vincent describes the breed as naturally suited to therapy work. "Golden Retrievers, as a breed, are naturally calm, friendly, and very approachable," she says. "They always have a wonderful smile on their face and express pleasure in greeting individuals with a constant tail wag." Although Goldens make up most of the GRRMF teams, the program also accepts family dogs of all breeds who have a suitable personality.

Vincent notes how Goldens can tune in to how a person is feeling. "Several of our dogs have a remarkable instinct for recognizing when someone is having a difficult day. They seek out that individual, staying by their side a little longer to offer comfort, companionship, and reassurance."

She shares a personal perspective on the impact of working with these dogs: "Having a special-needs grandchild gave me a firsthand understanding of the remarkable way a dog can help calm someone experiencing sensory overload. That experience inspired a lifelong commitment to sharing the healing power of therapy dogs. Our first GRRMF Golden, Bailey, became the in-house therapy dog at a special school for children with brain and spinal cord injuries, visiting three mornings each week. Watching Bailey's gentle presence bring comfort, connection, and calm to these students was nothing short of inspiring.

"Our second GRRMF Golden, Madison, possesses the same extraordinary gift for creating meaningful connections. During one visit to a memory care facility, Madison quietly sat beside a new resident

Courtesy GRRMF Hearts of Gold

A Few Golden Retriever Facts

History: The [Golden Retriever](#) was developed in the late 1800s in the Scottish Highlands by a nobleman who carefully bred several generations of hunting dogs to create a good-natured, sturdy retriever suited to the rainy weather and rugged terrain. In the following decades, Golden Retrievers came to America, where, with their good looks and friendly personality, the breed caught on right away. Today Golden Retrievers are consistently in the top five most popular breeds in the U.S.

A Golden in the White House: In 1974, President Gerald Ford's daughter Susan gifted him with a Golden puppy named Liberty. Liberty was by the president's side much of the time and was often photographed greeting guests in the Oval Office.

Hero Golden Retrievers: Golden Retrievers were prominent among the dogs who tirelessly served in search and recovery efforts following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Two of these K-9 heroes were Riley, who worked at Ground Zero both in searches and as a comfort dog, and [Bretagne](#), a FEMA rescue dog who worked 12-hour days in the rubble at the Pentagon.

Color: The breed is seen in a range of hues, from lighter to deeper golden—color is described in the standard as “rich, lustrous golden of various shades,” with extremely pale or dark tones less ideal.

National Club: The [Golden Retriever Club of America](#) is comprised of devotees dedicated to preserving and protecting the breed. Its members determine the breed standard, code of ethics, and performance standards, and the club provides a wealth of breed education and resources.



President Gerald R. Ford with Liberty, 1974

reading partner. During their first session, the young girl sat very close to Madison and read in little more than a whisper. By their third visit, she was confidently reading an entire story aloud to her. Although she never spoke to anyone else during that school year, she found her voice with Madison.”

GRRMF Hearts of Gold handler Katie K. recounts how her dog Sadie interacted with children at Give Kids the

World Village, where Make-A-Wish families can enjoy a free vacation:

“I brought Sadie to work with me, and she interacted with staff and kids throughout the day. I went to get a drink in the middle of the day, and kid after kid just kept coming up to pet Sadie—even parents. Six or seven kids from different families kept coming up, and they would see one kid pet her and know it was OK, so then more would get excited and come up. We probably spent 20 minutes on that drink run with kids loving on her. It reminded me how special the dogs can be to people who need them. It was different than a scheduled experience, and I think that’s what made it extra special.”

Summing up the gifts these loving dogs have to offer us simply through their presence, Vincent reaffirms the goal in bringing healing moments to people:

“By strengthening the bond between people and therapy animals, [we strive] to enrich lives, inspire hope, and create lasting, positive impacts throughout the communities we serve. With every visit, we aim to create moments of comfort, connection, and joy—one paw at a time.” **FD**

Arliss Paddock is the senior editor of our sister publication, the AKC Gazette. She has participated in canine events for many years and enjoys doing things with her English Cocker Spaniel, Nederlandse Kooikerhondje, and Welsh Springer Spaniels.

who had not spoken to anyone for more than two weeks since his arrival. As he gently stroked her soft fur, something changed. Without prompting, he began talking to Madison, opening a line of communication that had remained

closed until that moment.”

Madison’s special ability to connect had a similar effect on a young person. “Madison also made a lasting impact on an elementary student with selective mutism who was paired with her as a



From left: Golden Retriever Sadie of GRRMF Hearts of Gold visits with a child at Give Kids the World Village, where Make-A-Wish families can enjoy a free vacation. Right: LCC K-9 Comfort Dog Sharon with a Puget Sound fireman

