

## RUB MY BELLY 101

Nola, a muscular and squirmy Staffordshire terrier of an almost metallic gray hue, was lounging in the Cathedral of Learning on a winter Tuesday evening. The wind blew cold outside, and as University of Pittsburgh students made their way in from the chill Nola leapt into action—okay, lounged into action. As hand after hand petted her short, soft coat, she smiled, kissed, and wiggled.

Aaah . . . that'll take the edge off a stressful day.

It really does, too, says Dawn Marcus, an MD professor in the Department of Anesthesiology at the University of Pittsburgh. Marcus is a pain researcher and author of *The Power of Wagging Tails: A Doctor's Guide to Dog Therapy and Healing* (Demos Health, 2011). "[Therapy dogs] lower heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rate. Endorphins go up. There are substantial and long-lasting physiological changes," she says.

So how do dogs get schooled for the clinic and other therapy environments? Here's one way: Top off a rigorous certification program by allowing hundreds of students to canoodle with the pooches. The College Canines have been visiting the Cathedral every Tuesday evening when class is in session for years now. Nola and her cohort of about 10 other beasties are accompanied by volunteers from the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society, which sponsors the program. Students stop to kiss and pet and coo and snap photos to share with family. Some say they miss their own hounds, and the College Canines help alleviate some homesickness.

Marsha Robbins, an educator with the Humane Society, therapy dog trainer, and all-around pooch pusher, says, "The students seem to find this a very relaxing time. The dogs love it, too. They start to wiggle their tails when they know they're coming here." *—Joe Miksch*

*—Photo by Martha Rial*