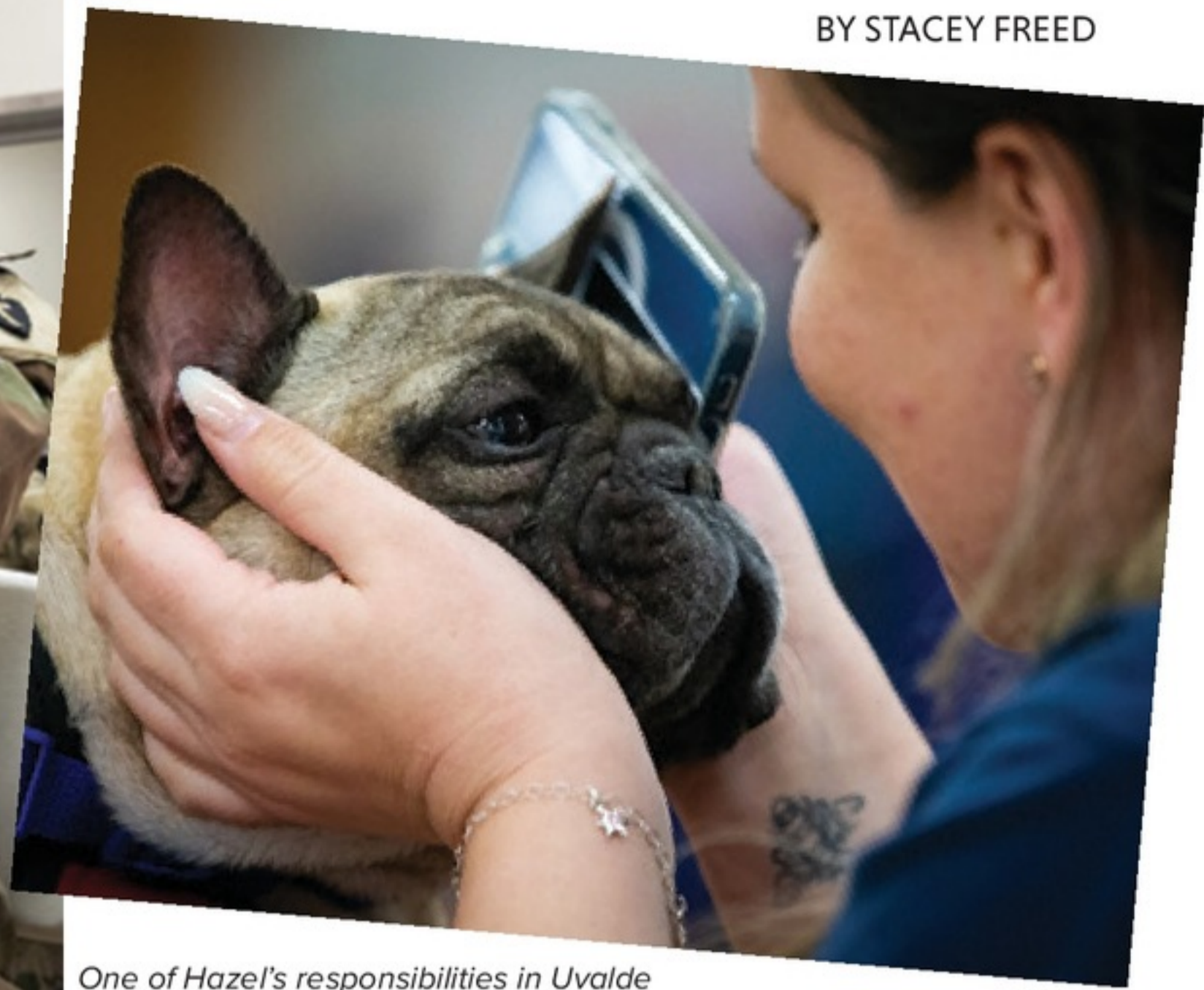


The Comfort Queen

An earnest expression and affectionate demeanor make Hazel a therapy dog star.



RENEE SPADE PHOTOGRAPHY



One of Hazel's responsibilities in Uvalde was comforting the many people who came to donate blood.

It was just a little town in south Texas until May 24, when 19 children and two teachers lost their lives in a horrifying act of gun violence. Then, everyone was talking about the nightmare in Uvalde.

Within a day, Therapy Animals of San Antonio's CARE (Crisis Animal Response) teams were speeding to the site, doing their best to comfort survivors of the Robb Elementary School mass shooting.

Among the 54 teams who made the 100-mile trip was Hazel, a 5-year-old French Bulldog, and her handler, Sara Morgan.

"Counselors were there helping children, families, teachers, and staff from Robb Elementary. People were in tears, and I'd bring Hazel over to them. They would hold her in their laps," Morgan says. "She's got those extra rolls of fur and she's soft and squishy and you can just squeeze her. Nothing bothers her. Kids pull her ears or rub her nose and she's not bothered by any of it."

Comforting families in their grief takes energy, and after a visit, Hazel returns home and rests deeply. But the respite she provides is worth the exertion.

"One family held her for 20 minutes, and they didn't want to let go," Morgan says. "For a short period of time, Hazel took them away from their grief."

The outpouring of sorrow and fear at the school was overwhelming. One dog was trembling after visiting the counseling center for a brief period. "Not all dogs are cut out to be crisis response animals," Morgan says. Part of AACR (Animal Assisted Crisis Response) training is to recognize the signs of stress, such as panting, clamping a tail between their legs, and shaking.

But Hazel has worked with grief and trauma since she started therapy visits. She has been a regular visitor to the Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas, where she offers comfort to children dealing with the sudden loss of loved ones. She also has regular assignments helping children of military families cope with deployment.

That's in addition to her frequent visits to The Children's Hospital, where her sweetness and serenity calm young patients who are facing serious medical issues.

In hospitals, Hazel and Morgan

follow a strict routine. First they stop in to greet the nurses, who update them on how many spinal procedures are happening that day. Then Hazel says hi to the children. She'll rest on their beds. They pet her while they get their IVs. She sits with them while they decorate their anesthesia masks before surgery.

"The kids love to see her," Morgan says. "Seeing her cute little face means the world to them."

While therapy dogs are often retrievers, sometimes a smaller breed is just right—and Frenchies are a natural fit. Their standard describes the breed as "well behaved, adaptable, and comfortable companions with an affectionate nature and even disposition."

Hazel—@HappyHappyHazel to her Instagram and Facebook followers—has all of those traits and more, seemingly intuitive in her understanding of human feelings. "She has always had an amazing personality and loves to make people happy," Morgan says.

CLEVER AND CURIOUS

When Morgan's neighbor, a pediatric neurologist, first met Hazel, she saw something special in the expressive Frenchie pup. "She said to me, 'I'd

HEROES & HELPERS

love for you to help my kids before their procedures,' ” recalls Morgan, who soon thereafter enrolled Hazel in therapy training at a PetSmart in San Antonio. It took Morgan and Hazel about a year to work their way through her therapy training classes. “If they said *sit*, she sat. *Come*, she’d come. She is very food-driven and it was easy to train her,” Morgan says.

Trainer Bara Ward, of Bee Positive Dog Training in San Mateo, California, owns three French Bulldogs. She agrees that the breed is food-motivated but says that French Bulldogs can also be stubborn. “You need to be persistent,” she says.

And even if you’re not training them for therapy work, Ward says it is imperative that French Bulldogs have good, solid behavior skills—if only to keep them safe. “They are extremely clever and a real source of joy, but they’re insanely curious and as naive as toddlers,” she says. “There’s an innocence about them; they resemble



At the Thousand Oaks Elementary School, Hazel works with the children of military families, helping them deal with the stress connected with deployment.

Frenchie Facts

Modern French Bulldogs are descended from England’s Bulldogs. After the Industrial Revolution, breeders developed a lighter, toy Bulldog with upright ears, a round forehead, and short underjaw. The little dog’s popularity spread to Paris, where they were known as Bouledogues Francais. Soon wealthy Americans traveling to France fell in love with what fanciers call “a clown in the cloak of a philosopher.”

“They are endearing in their temperament, and their small size makes them an attractive proposition for apartment living,” says James Dalton, a French Bulldog breeder and 2017 AKC Breeder of the Year (Non-Sporting).

The American standard evolved to recognize the “bat ear” shape (as opposed to a rose ear) and various acceptable colors and patterns, including brindle, cream, fawn, white, and a few variations among those colors.

Today, French Bulldogs are the second most popular dog in the United States (behind Labrador Retrievers). They’re featured in artwork and films, social media feeds, and on the tabloid pages under the arms of actors.



Everybody Wants One

“Fame attracts lunatics,” was how rock ‘n’ roll legend Elton John put it.

Actors, musicians, and others in the public eye have long known this. Now French Bulldogs, the AKC’s second most popular breed in the country, are experiencing the dark side of being irresistibly adorable. They have been called the “it dog” and the “dog of stars,” and that’s made them a prime target for theft.

The phenomenon made national headlines in February 2021, when a gunman shot Lady Gaga’s dog walker and stole two of her three Frenchies. The walker survived and the dogs were found days later, tied to a pole. But the attack, caught on home surveillance cameras, was terrifying to Frenchie owners.

Detectives said they did not believe that the dognappers were aware that these dogs belonged to a famous entertainer. The attraction was the breed and its qualities—portable, cute, and so desirable.

“French Bulldogs are wildly popular,” says Brandi Hunter Munden, AKC’s vice president of public relations and communications. Their small size makes it easy for a thief to snatch one and run.

The price for a Frenchie can be high, anywhere from \$1,500 to \$5,000 or more. “People think they can resell them on the black market for a lot of money,” says breeder James Dalton.

The best thing an owner can do, Dalton says, is to “make sure your dog is microchipped, which can help identify the dog and get him or her returned to you if they’re lost or stolen.”

Other tips on protecting your dog from thieves include:

- Never leave your dog alone in a car or tied up outside a storefront. It just takes a couple of minutes to smash a window, grab a leash, and run. It may be a better idea to leave the dog at home when you are running errands.
- Keep an eye on your dog even when he’s in your backyard.
- Don’t divulge personal details to strangers, especially what you paid for your pup.
- If your dog is stolen, report the theft to police immediately, put up flyers, and get the word out on social media.

babies with their big round eyes and big heads. Our human instinct might be to pick them up and cuddle them. But if there’s trouble, their curiosity will find it, and if you turn your back on them, they can really be in hot water.”

Hazel and Morgan practiced *sit* and



Lady Gaga in Berlin, 2014

stay and getting used to crowds, stairs, elevators, loud noises, and strange sights at local stores. After Morgan completed her required training courses, she and Hazel were evaluated together and certified as a therapy team. Morgan later went on to further their credentials with AACR and CARE

(Canine Animal Response Team). Hazel also has her AKC Canine Good Citizen and AKC Therapy Dog titles, and was named 2022 Pet Partners Pet of the Year.

CANINE COUNSELOR

Soon after getting her therapy dog certification, Hazel and Morgan began volunteering at Ronald McDonald House, an international organization that supports overnight stays for families with children undergoing medical treatment. Then they added the Children’s Bereavement Center to Hazel’s schedule, where she visits with groups of children between the ages of 3 and 18 whose parents or loved ones died.

“One evening, a little girl was upset and she crawled under the table. The counselors couldn’t get her to come out, but Hazel crawled under with her and loved on her and the little girl emerged,” Morgan says. “I’m so blessed to be able to share the love of my dog with those that need it.”

The pair goes to schools, airports, and hospitals. Morgan says that when she dresses Hazel in her vest and her identification credentials, the dog knows she’s working. “If she doesn’t have the vest on, she thinks she could be going on an outing. She understands the process of going to work.”

That work now includes the 200-mile round trip to Uvalde. As of late July, when FD was going to press, Hazel was there for summer school, curling up on laps, offering a paw, and doing her best to spread comfort in the face of tragedy. Morgan predicts that they will be there for some time as the town prepares for the start of a new school year. **FD**

Stacey Freed, a freelance writer who works from her home in Pittsford, New York, is never too far from her black Lab, Gertie.