

Riccardo and Duncan — 4 mths. old, wearing his cape.

Dogs, as many pet owners know, are nonjudgmental animals. They do not seek perfect owners, or in this case, trainers. The dogs are eager to discover what pleases their individual trainers and then do just that.

Underneath the Dog Cape

Its mission is to help kids with disabilities assist people with disabilities

by Lea Ann Shearer

“Great dog! What is he being trained for?” is a frequent question trainers hear while on public outings with service dogs. As the director of Paws for Freedom, Inc. (PFF), a service dog nonprofit in Overland Park, KS, I strive to prepare my student trainers and recipients to answer this question. As I tell them before their first public outing, the sight of a person with a dog wearing a cape in public attracts attention!

WHAT IS PFF?

PFF is the only service dog program of its kind in the metro area. Its mission is to help kids with disabilities assist people with disabilities. Through a partnership with Horizon Academy, a private school in Roeland Park, KS, eight middle and high school students are learning to train service dogs in an after school club called START (Student Trainer and Retriever Teams). The dogs learn to retrieve items, turn lights on and off and open and close doors. It gen-



Caesar, doing the “nose it” command with the pink/white button — with student trainer Alli P.

erally takes two years to train a service dog. After training, these dogs are placed with people who use wheelchairs.

DOGS GO TO SCHOOL?

Horizon Academy is a private school for children with learning disabilities. The dogs go to school for one hour a day, five days a week. Once a week, the dogs go on public outings. Each student trainer is paired with one dog for the school year and is responsible for grooming and training. The student trainers receive animal assisted therapy through training the dogs. Dogs, as many pet owners know, are nonjudgmental animals. They do not seek perfect owners, or in this case, trainers. The dogs are eager to discover what pleases their



Group picture from June graduation.
L-R — Hannah Glidewell, Libby Lunn, Allie, Julie Lunn, Ted Lunn, Lea Ann Shearer.



Student trainer Chris H. and his assigned dog, Cruiser

individual trainers and then do just that. They never tire of receiving praise, whether it is verbal, tactile, edible or all of the above! The student trainers' communication skills and self-esteem improve throughout each school year. They also obtain important skills for future employment, such as dependability, consistency and following directions.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE PARTNERSHIP?

Having the student trainers involved is a great help to my nonprofit. At first, one might think that they are the main group receiving the benefits of this partnership. This is true, but it is not the only purpose of the partnership. The national average wait list time for a person who needs a

service dog is three to five years. The START Club allows me to have twice the number of dogs in training at one time. Ultimately, the wait list time for one of my service dogs is shortened. As one recipient described her service dog, a female lab named Fonda, in a letter to PFF, "She is my right hand and my friend. She gives me freedom."

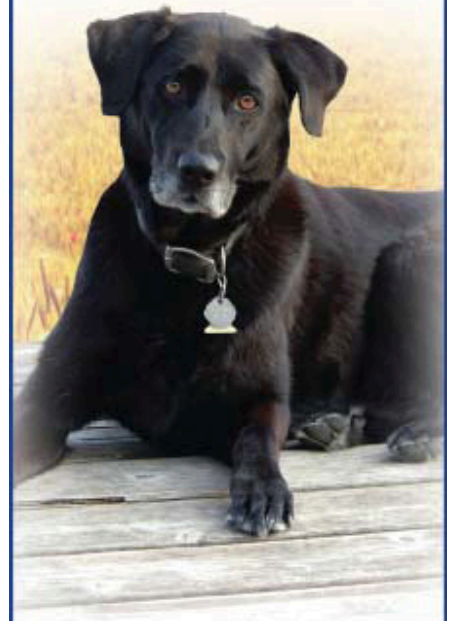
WHAT ARE IN THE PLANS TO COME?

Currently, PFF plans to graduate three service dogs in early summer 2009. PFF will have its fourth anniversary in February, 2009 and is actively seeking potential applicants for its service dogs. Through our volunteer program, presentations, START Club and website, awareness of my young program's existence is growing. If you know of a person who might benefit from a service dog or has expressed interest in obtaining a service dog, please have him or her contact PFF. Whether your dog is your pet, your service dog or a service dog in training, what the dog gives you is truly immeasurable.

Lea Ann Shearer, is the Director for Paws for Freedom, Inc. She can be reached at Paws For Freedom at (913) 901-9400 or email: LeaAnn@PawsForFreedom.org.



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