

Teaching Young Dogs New Tricks

BY STEPHEN KOPFINGER

LANCASTER COUNTY, PA – Think of a room full of puppies and the term “discipline” doesn’t come to mind. Romping, barking, wrestling and lots of friendly biting, yes. Concentration and obeying commands ... not really.

But both scenarios were evident recently in a room at the headquarters of United Disabilities Services, 1901 Olde Homestead Lane. The playtime part, however, came after the little canines finished work.

UDS, a Lancaster nonprofit organization, which provides personal care and independent living support for the elderly and disabled, is training its latest generation of service dogs.

When the dogs’ two-year conditioning process is done, they will help the community in several ways. They might assist their owners with basic tasks, such as turning on light switches or retrieving something from the refrigerator. They can be “therapy dogs” at care facilities and schools. Or, they can simply provide companionship to the elderly, or those with autism or depression.

Disney is that kind of dog.

The 91-pound yellow Labrador retriever keeps Scott Stillwell Company in his Landisville home.

Stillwell, 27, is paraplegic, and while Disney likes to stretch out on the living room couch like any dog, he also opens doors for Stillwell in more ways than one.

Disney physically opens closets and the refrigerator, but he’s a kind of ice-breaker, too.

“He helps me socialize,” Stillwell said. “He’s my friend and companion.”

Disney also does pet therapy at the Oak Leaf Manor retirement facilities in Landisville and New Danville, as well as Landis Homes.

Disney was trained by Sabina Hower, who started New Life Assistance Dogs, the former name for UDS Service Dogs, in the 1990s. Hower had trained Phoenix, a golden retriever who helped Stillwell and was Disney’s predecessor. Phoenix passed away in 2002. Stillwell, whose mother, Mitzi Herman, died in 2001, went to live with his grandmother, Zandra Miller, for three years.

Then one day, Stillwell told Miller, who lives across the street from Stillwell’s current home, that he was ready for another service dog.

He has had Disney since 2005. Disney’s a healthy dog, but he’s 7 years old. “That’s why I want to try another puppy to take his place in tow years,” Stillwell said. When Disney “retires,” he will go to live with Miller.

Enter Clifford, a 5-month old golden retriever who was purchased by Miller herself and is being groomed by UDS as Disney’s successor. He’s a typical trainee at the organization.

“We have four breeds: boxers, Labradors, standard poodles and golden retrievers,” said Kristi Smith, secondary trainer at UDS, who takes over instructing when the dogs are 18 months old. Until then, they are raised in “puppy homes” where the dogs are taught basic commands and socialization skills.

That means getting used to behaving in the outside world – “restaurants, movies, church ... anywhere the public is allowed,” Smith said.

Dog lovers know that pooches like to play. But service dogs have to learn when it's time to get into working mode. Amazingly, UDS services dogs do.

When "working," each dog wears a red vest indicating he or she is a service dog. That identifies the animals' role and indicates that it's not the time for fun and games. Should someone on the street pet a service dog, the animal is taught to look at its owner, not the person doing the petting. When the vest goes on, "it's time to work," summed up puppy raiser Linda Rineer, Holtwood. "We don't want them to lose focus on the job." Smith agreed.

That changes when the vest comes off. To the dog, that means it's OK to relax, socialize and play – not unlike when a person comes home and sheds work clothes in exchange for something casual.

In the case of Cheyenne, Quentin and Savannah, they have big shoes – make that paws – to fill.

Their mother, Kendall, a 2 ½ year old black Labrador, is a service dog herself. But "she has a temperament they hope to pass on to {her} puppies," Rineer said.

Puppy raiser Lorrie Snyder, Pequea, took pride in watching 12 week old Cheyenne in action at the recent UDS get together.

"I love dogs and I love training," Snyder said. Cheyenne is her second service dog to be.

"She's doing really well," Snyder added, noting that someday Cheyenne might be "getting the phone {or} bringing the remote." As if sensing the business nature of the conversation, Cheyenne kept her gaze fully on the trainer.

For Rineer, Kendall represents her third time around as a puppy raiser. She admits it's difficult to give a dog up to a new owner when the time comes.

Yet, she says, "I don't really lose a dog, I gain a friend."

Tia DeNunzio, 13, can identify. She's helping to train Angelina, a standard poodle who is already a big dog at 5 months.

"She's really smart – she's just a little stubborn sometimes!" Tia, of Manheim Township, said. When it's time for Angelina to find a new home, it will be a little tough to take.

However, Tia said, "it's for a good thing. "And I'll still see her sometimes."



Scott Stillwell and Disney his service dog.



Tia DeNunzio and Angelina