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Brookeville nonprofit training dogs for wounded and disabled military veterans

Year-old organization has three dogs in program

by Nesa Nourmohammadi | Staff Writer



Anthony Castellano/The Gazette

Maverick, a 12-week-old golden retriever, is being trained through Hero Dogs, a Brookeville-based nonprofit organization, to be paired with a military veteran with physical and emotional disabilities.

Handsome with big brown eyes and blonde locks, Maverick is young, gentle, curious and ready to spend the rest of his life helping others.

Maverick is a 12-week-old golden retriever being trained through Hero Dogs, a Brookeville-based nonprofit founded one year ago, to be paired with a military veteran who has physical or emotional disabilities.

The organization was founded by research scientist-turned-dog-trainer Jennifer Lund, who owns See Spot Sit, a dog training business based out of her Brookeville home.

Lund started training service dogs during graduate school and spent years volunteering with the nonprofit Guiding Eyes for the Blind before pursuing dog training full time after moving to Brookeville eight years ago.

Bill Gray, chair of Montgomery County' Commission on Veterans Affairs, did not have an organization like Hero Dogs around when he and other military personnel returned home from Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, he said, but recognizes the value it has for those coming home from the Middle East today.

"The dogs are trained to help people with disabilities and they allow the individual a complete life," he said. "It's a great opportunity for service men and women to have Hero Dogs."

Raising puppies for a future as service dogs requires commitment.

Over the course of a day, puppy trainers must be able to take their dog out to relieve themselves between 15 to 20 times and out for an hour-long walk, rain or shine. They also need to put in time for obedience and socialization training three times per week and attend one obedience training class per week at See Spot Sit.

Feedings and grooming, especially for long-haired golden retrievers like Maverick, can also require a sizeable portion of time and effort.

"They have to take everything in stride," Lund said. "It's a lot of work to get done."

Long journey to being a hero

Puppy training through Hero Dogs is not for the faint of heart — for either dog or trainer. It begins with 15 months when the dog lives and works with his or her trainer at home.

Lund asked that Maverick's trainer's name not be used to protect the dog. The value of dogs like him can make them vulnerable to theft, Lund said.

After the initial training, the dog will go back to Lund and enter a four- to six-month program that focuses on learning specialized tasks such as opening doors and retrieving and grabbing objects, which can take up to four hours of time per day.

Maverick will be 2 and half years old when — and if — he graduates from Hero Dogs, Lund said.

There is no guarantee that Maverick or any of the other three puppies in the Hero Dogs program will graduate. Less than 50 percent of puppies become full-fledged service dogs, Lund said.

"Sometimes there's a health issue or the dog can't adapt to the stress of a busy urban environment," she said. "Illness is the most common reason."

Health issues that could lead to a dog's disqualification can range from bone and joint problems to thyroid and genetic factors.

Regardless of disposition, a Hero Dogs puppy will find a home. If a dog is cut from the program for health issues, the puppy trainer will be asked to adopt him or her. If the dog fails to graduate, he or she will be given to a veteran solely for companionship.

After a dog graduates from Hero Dogs, the next step is to pair the pooch with a veteran whose physical and emotional needs can best be suited to the dog's abilities. Veterans afflicted with physical disabilities or psychiatric ailments like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can apply for placement beginning in January.

Hero Dogs is training puppies like Maverick to aid veterans with an array of disabilities. For a physically disabled veteran with limited mobility, a service dog can retrieve objects, open doors and flip light switches. A veteran suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can rely on the service dog to wake him or her up from a nightmare, while a veteran with hearing loss can be aided by a dog that can alert him or her when someone rings the doorbell.

The long-term goal for Lund is for Hero Dogs to go national.

She runs the program with donations, and most of the dogs are donated.

By this time next year Lund hopes to have 12 dogs enrolled in Hero Dogs, but for now, she continues to seek out volunteers, puppies and puppy trainers.

"With the number of troops coming back and going to Walter Reed [Hospital], I don't think we'll ever meet the need to help them all," Lund said.

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Maverick, whose official name is Hero Dogs Top Gun, is one of four puppies in the Hero Dogs family since it was founded last year. His three other comrades are:

-Hero Dogs Lady Liberty, or Libby, a yellow Labrador.

-Hero Dogs General Eisenhower, or Ike, a black Labrador.

-Hero Dogs Theodore Roosevelt, or Teddy, a golden retriever

For more information on Hero Dogs, visit www.hero-dogs.org.