

The Well Being

By Pamela Schipper | Photography by Julie Lutz Hipkins



COURAGEOUS COMPANIONS Hero Dogs Train to Heal

In a tranquil corner of northern Montgomery County, Lady Liberty, Theodore Roosevelt and General Dwight D. Eisenhower are training for a special duty—the privilege of serving men and women who have sacrificed for our country, helping them to heal and cope with their injuries. These dogs are learning that sometimes when the war is over, the fight has just begun.

Some 40,000 military have been wounded in action since the War on Terror began. Of these, more than 17,000 have sustained injuries serious enough to prevent them from returning to duty. Hero Dogs was organized in February 2010 to provide service dogs to these returning heroes. "It just seemed like the time was right and there was a need, a particular need in this area that wasn't being met," says Jennifer Lund, president and founder of the Brookeville-based Hero Dogs, "especially with so many troops returning to the D.C. area first, being treated at Walter Reed and staying here for a couple of years before going home."

Just like its service dogs-in-training Libby, Teddy and Ike, the nonprofit is in its puppyhood ... and it's enjoying the bounding, positive energy that comes with this stage of

growth. When Lund, a scientist and accomplished dog trainer, issued her first call for help, "the response was kind of overwhelming, the number of people who said, 'I'd love to help.'" Hero Dogs is already 50 volunteers strong, has three dogs in training and expects three more by year's end. Lund says that the organization's near-term goal is to graduate 12 dogs per year into service.

Puppies are donated by generous breeders, but Lund looks for certain characteristics before accepting dogs into the program. A puppy must love people, have a strong desire to work, be persistent and exhibit a fine-tuned awareness of the environment without overreacting to stimuli. "Mostly what we're concerned about at this age would be fear-based behaviors," says Lund. "If they're afraid of traffic, noise sensitive or if they're shy of certain types of people—obviously, they can't be afraid of a person with a cane or wheels."

After a puppy is accepted into the program, Lund works with him or her for a couple of weeks, teaching foundation commands like potty, wait and kennel. The puppy is then placed with a puppy raiser, a local individual who is able to work with him or her once a day and also bring the puppy to



GOOD DOG

First in her class, Libby is the most experienced at 10 months. She can pull a laundry basket over to someone or bring individual items of clothing from the basket to a person sitting in a wheelchair. She can pick up a cane, crutch or key fob. She can even open doors and operate a light switch.

Despite these amazing abilities, "Libby won't enter fulltime training until probably April," says Lund. "She'll stay with her puppy raiser until she is about 15 months old, and then she'll spend four to six months with the trainers, really doing focused training on her tasks. ... So that would put her at around 20 months old before we would decide who we'd like to match her with.

The two of them will train together for another six months."

TEAM PLAYERS

JoAnn Amann, head of client services, says that Hero Dogs will begin taking applications in early 2011. There is a nominal fee for applying, but no charge to the veteran for the service dog and associated training, which is extensive.

"We start with the idea of who we might potentially match this dog up with, and then we'll tailor the training specific to that person," explains Lund. "So we start out saying the dog

Lund for class once a week. Puppy raisers are an extremely important part of the training program, and Lund is grateful for their commitment.

HOME LIFE

Maria is Hero Dogs' first puppy raiser, and the proud foster parent of Libby, an American Field Retriever. "She's wonderful," Maria says. "I mean, I have my dogs and I have cats, and they're all happy together. The cats have taught her a few things, and it's good that she's in an environment with little kids." Home life

for Libby differs somewhat from that of Maria's other pets, though. Libby can't lounge on the sofa or eat food that accidentally drops to the floor. As a service dog, she's expected to adhere to publicly acceptable standards of behavior and help a disabled veteran who may need her to retrieve food, pills and other objects—including shoes—from the floor.

"The question I get asked most often is, 'How can you do this and give her away?'" says Maria. "The thing people need to realize, that they need to go into this knowing, is this is not their dog. They're doing it because they're going to give somebody independence, and they're doing it to help somebody who has done a whole lot more for us than we're doing raising a dog."

Her voice catches. "Am I going to miss her? Absolutely! Am I going to be the proud momma when she graduates? Absolutely."



Facing page: Proudly sporting her service dog vest, Libby is ready to work. **Top:** JoAnn Amann (left) and Jennifer Lund (right) thank Maria (middle) for her dedication as the organization's first puppy raiser. **Above, left:** Libby and Lund demonstrate how a service dog learns to operate a light switch. **Above, right:** Libby picks up the crutch by its soft handle and carries it to Lund, seated in a wheelchair.

needs some basic skills, and then if the client says, 'Well, I also have hearing loss because of a blast and I can't hear the doorbell ring,' we'll say, 'OK, well, we're also going to teach this dog to do some hearing dog tasks.'" This individualized approach to training distinguishes Hero Dogs from other programs that typically train just one kind of service dog.

Hero Dogs currently needs puppy raisers, space and funding. Amann, who is hearing impaired and aided by her hearing dog, Hope, encourages people to get involved: "This is the greatest gift you will ever give anybody—just staying involved in the stages of training for the dog. There's just no way you can ever give anybody a gift like that. These dogs change your life." 🐾

Interested volunteers may call 1-888-570-8653 or e-mail hero@hero-dogs.org.