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REVIEWS

Psychiatric duty dogs

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their masters feel safe,
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PSYCHIATRIC DUTY DOGS

JERRY ROBERTS PHOTOS

Lauren Rainaud, above left, walks Hayden, Cortney Thibodeau walks Haven, center, and Erin Riel walks Harper during a training class for service dogs and their fosters at Diggity Dogs Service Dogs in Shelburne Falls. They are playing a game of musical chairs aimed at teaching the dogs to sit and stay despite distractions. In the photo at left, Sarah Meikle, owner of Diggity Dogs, directs Harper into a protective position. Riel is behind her.

Teaching pups to make their masters feel safe, secure, social

By ELISSA ALFORD
Gazette Contributing Writer

Erin Riel takes Harper the labradoodle around the room practicing walking with a relaxed leash, the puppy's dark eyes watching her as if to ask, "Is this right?" "What's next?" The 5-month-old with gleaming black curls and gentle manner is — if it needs saying — adorable, and Riel, an animal science major at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, smiles down at him with approval.

They are in a training session, held on a recent Tuesday night in Shelburne Falls, but the goal is not to mold a polite canine companion, though Harper certainly will be that. Taking place at Diggity Dogs Service Dogs Inc., the class is to teach Harper and four other puppies to assist people with disabilities most other

service dog programs don't address: psychiatric problems and the need for medical alert.

Riel, 20, who will be a junior at UMass in the fall, has been volunteering as a foster parent and trainer for Harper since January, helping him learn to navigate busy, every-day life in a calm, controlled manner and teaching him tasks that will make a difference in someone's life.

"Even though it's a lot of hard work, I love being part of something that can have such an impact," Riel said in a phone interview later. The result: Harper may soon be placed with a child who has autism.

Sarah Meikle, 37, Diggity Dog's founder, executive director and head trainer, started the organization a year ago because she believes passionately in the power of dogs to help and heal.

"People and dogs have been liv-

ing and working together for a long time," she said. "The relationship one has with a service dog is a profound and beautiful thing. In so many cases, a service dog can do things that nothing else can. There are no medications that wake up people with PTSD during nightmares, hold someone down during a seizure, or get their phone and medication for them when they are temporarily, partially paralyzed."

Life-changing potential

Meikle, who says she has always been fascinated by psychology, became aware of the work of service dogs in 2008, while an Ada Comstock scholar at Smith College in Northampton. After working with a social work student in the master's program who was doing her thesis on psychiatric service dogs, Meikle ended up devoting most of her own

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"A service dog can help someone in the early stages of Alzheimer's or with a traumatic brain injury continue taking the familiar walks that are important to their health. It can keep an agoraphobic individual from stepping into traffic when overwhelmed, or become a stabilizing, omnipresent relationship in the life of a child with autism."

— Sarah Meikle, dog trainer

time at Smith on learning more about the subject. That included doing her own research on the impact such service dogs can have.

What she discovered excited her.

Therapy is important, she said, but it can't provide calming, physical touch or the steady, around-the-clock guidance a

service dog can.

"A service dog can help someone in the early stages of Alzheimer's or with a traumatic brain injury continue taking the familiar walks that are important to their health," she said. "It can keep an agoraphobic individual from stepping into traffic when overwhelmed, or become a stabilizing, omnipresent relation-



JERREY ROBERTS

Jack Tallboy, who is a University of Massachusetts student, practices brushing Emma's teeth at the start of training class. Those who help train the service dogs, must provide them a loving home and good care.

ship in the life of a child with autism."

A service dog can help individuals reconnect with their communities, easing their sense of isolation and giving them and their families some new-found freedom, she said. "It is truly amazing and life changing."

Meikle was determined to create a nonprofit that could train and place such dogs at an affordable price. Usually the cost of a service dog is prohibitive — \$10,000 to \$35,000 — waiting lists are long, and dogs trained for psychiatric help are hard to find.

To reduce that expense, Meikle adopts dogs with the appropriate temperament from shelters and accepts animals donated by reputable breeders. They are then housed and trained — with her guidance — by volunteer foster parent-trainers, like Riel. A client pays \$5,000 for a dog, which includes at least a year of post-placement training and support from Meikle. Individuals seeking to have their own dogs trained pay \$1,800 for a one-week course, which also includes a year of follow-up. All clients have lifetime access to classes and additional training for free, said Meikle.

A foster's commitment is roughly six to 12 months, and includes offering a loving home, exposing the dog to a wide variety of environments — work, school, airports, restaurants — attending weekly training classes and practicing what they

learn. Since it's an intensive undertaking, Meikle has relief fosters to help out full-time fosters as needed.

Learning the ropes

All of the puppies at the Tuesday class with their foster caregivers are labradoodles, donated to the program by a breeder. The caregivers include Beth Reynolds, a photographer from Greenfield, Riel, and four other animal science and pre-vet majors at UMass.

After they have settled their puppies quietly beside them, Meikle begins with basic hygiene: tooth brushing. The pups have mixed feelings about this.

Jack Tallboy is fostering the petite and cream-colored Emma, who tastes the toothpaste but wiggles away from the brush.

He explains that he is volunteering for Diggit for the same reason he's in the pre-vet program: "I'm compelled by the human-animal bond, the companionship, the give and take," he said. "And by knowing that she's going to help someone."

Reynolds sits down to hold Emma for Tallboy. The puppy she's been fostering for three months, Able, just has been placed with a couple in the eastern part of the state who are coping with Alzheimer's disease.

Typically dogs are at least 1-year-old when placed, but Able went off to work at 6 months old. The couple wanted to bond early, Reynolds says, and learn locations and routes

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JERREY ROBERTS

UMass student Cortney Thibodeau commands Haven into a post position, that is standing behind the client to help the person feel protected.

they need help with.

"It's so exciting," Reynolds says. "It's like having a kid go off to college."

Meikle circles the large room's bright pink carpet, cheerfully checking everyone's teeth-brushing and giving suggestions. Mirrors cover one wall and prompts and reminders are printed across the glass in multi-colored ink. A three-sided triangle spells out the three factors that are crucial components of the training process: "Distance. Distraction. Duration."

Once she is satisfied she moves on to teaching two commands: "post" and "block," commands that are particularly useful for people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or a social phobia, Meikle says.

She first demonstrates with her own dog, the shaggy Kiwi, then repeats the demonstration with Harper. Eventually, when seeing a subtle hand signal or hearing the command "post," the dog will know to stand directly behind the client to help the person feel protected, she says. At "block" the dog will

place its body crosswise in front of the client's legs in an effort to lower the individual's anxiety in crowds and social exchanges.

Quick results

One of Diggity Dog's clients, Kylie Patterson, 26, of Los Angeles, suffers from PTSD.

Patterson, who is plagued by nightmares and anxiety, had tried numerous treatments to relieve her symptoms to no avail.

"I'd been in therapy," she said in a telephone interview. "I'd worked hard and tried a variety of medications and was frustrat-

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JERREY ROBERTS

Lauren Rainaud trains Hayden to block, that is place his body in front of the client's legs to lower the individual's anxiety in crowds and other social situations.

ed that nothing was working." Her therapist suggested she get a service dog and, after a lot of online searching, she found Diggity Dogs.

After a year of waiting, while working with Meikle to develop a specific program based on her symptoms and needs, she received Royce, a mix of pure poodle and labradoodle, about a month ago.

Though the relationship is brand new, Patterson says she has already seen results.

"Royce has done more for me than therapy and medication combined," she said. The dog lays her head on Patterson's lap if the woman is agitated, offers "deep pressure therapy" by stretching her body out on Patterson's, and continues to work on waking Patterson from nightmares.

Like all of those who receive dogs from Diggity, Patterson completes training logs and monthly progress reports for

Meikle. She also sends Meikle several videos each month, all of which Meikle reviews and then discusses with her, a cycle that continues throughout the year following placement. Once the goals of the team's year-long training have been met, owner and dog take the public access test, as defined by Assistance Dogs International, together. (The dog must pass the test once prior to placement.)

"I would absolutely recommend a service dog," Patterson said, "especially if you've tried other means." But, she notes, the relationship between dog and client is a two-way street.

"You do have to be aware that this is a being, a partnership, and not a medication you can start or stop. They bring you joy and stability"—but you also need to take care of them.

An important adjustment, she says, is to accept that by using a service dog, one's psychiatric

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problems become more public.

"You're wearing your medication on your sleeve," she said. "It's not a therapy appointment after work or a pill you take in the privacy of your bathroom. People need to drop the shame of having others know their way of coping. It's a small price to pay for feeling better."

Yajaira Flores-Castro, 31, says she too has found that getting a service dog from Diggity Dogs has provided her with relief. Having Max, a black Labrador, "is the best thing that's happened to me," she said in a telephone interview.

Once an accomplished violinist and aspiring lawyer, Flores-Castro moved from Puerto Rico to Boston in 2009 to be treated for serious health problems including two types of seizures. She's been hospitalized dozens of times, she says, and has suffered both physically and emotionally.

But Max, she said, is changing that.

Flores-Castro, who lives by herself, said the dog sleeps with her, and if she has a seizure, puts his paws on her chest. That, she said, gives her comfort, and minimizes the possibility of injury. Whether seizures happen at home or in public, he is there when she wakes up disoriented.



BETH REYNOLDS

Pups-in-training, Haven, Henry, Hayden, Harper and Emma, line up for a photo at the end of class.

"I'm not alone," she said.

That confidence, she said, has given her license to think about the future. "I'm going back to college," she said. "Now I don't live with fear."

Ignoring distractions

Back in Shelburne Falls, the fosters' training class moves on to musical chairs. It's a game designed to test the dogs' ability to do something basic but important: lie down and stay no matter what the distraction.

Four chairs are set up together in the middle of the room, the music begins, and the fos-

ters walk the dogs, on leashes, around the chairs. When the music stops, the fosters must ask their dogs to sit and stay at a distance before they themselves each take a chair. Whoever is the last to manage this is left standing, and then tries to get other dogs out of their "sit-stay."

If a dog moves, then its foster must relinquish his or her chair. Before a dog meets a client it must learn everything from sitting, staying, walking through crowds, accepting a friendly stranger and sitting politely for petting. It must learn off-leash control and appropriate restau-

rant behavior.

The dogs also learn a variety of service behaviors, but specific tasks are tackled once a client and dog begin working together.

Lauren Rainaud's puppy, Hayden, does pretty well at the basics, she says. She has been fostering him for almost three months, taking him to classes with her at UMass and to her job at an on-campus convenience store while practicing commands throughout the day.

Hayden, whose gold eyes are a striking contrast to his chocolate coat, draws a lot of attention. "I usually let people pet

him," Rainaud says, "because it's a chance to practice 'say hello' while sitting and staying calm."

Her goal is to become a dog trainer. "I've already learned more than I ever expected," she says. "And seeing the face of one client when they came to pick up their dog — that was awesome."

Fosters do not see the dogs again after placement in order to allow the animals to forge primary relationships with their new owners.

"People told me, 'You're way stronger than I am, because I could never give them up' " Beth Reynolds said. "So I have a mantra, 'I might love him, but somebody else needs him.' I think about how much good Able is doing."

As the class draws to an end, and the puppies line up to get their pictures taken by Reynolds, Riel notes that the dogs turn into helpers "in the most amazing ways. You think a dog will never be able to learn these tasks, and then — wow — they're doing it," she said. "The fact that you can train a dog to help curb the effects of a disease, something a person didn't choose and can't control, give them another chance at life — that's incredible."

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