

Unleashing abilities

Organization taps capacity of animals to help humans

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After surviving a health crisis where doctors told her she only had six months to live, Maureen "Mo" Maurer sold her accounting business to pursue a passion for training assistance dogs. It was something she had dreamed of since she was 8 years old.

"Dogs have so much untapped potential to help people," said Maurer. "As I learned, our time here is limited. I wanted to make the most of it."

Fifteen years and 60 successful dog-and-human pairings later, Maurer is realizing her dream of "unleashing abilities" in canines to improve the lives of humans. She does it with help from volunteers and financial supporters of the nonprofit Assistance Dogs of Hawaii.

Article Photos



The nationally accredited and internationally recognized organization provides assistance dogs to children and adults with disabilities free of charge. It receives no government funding and is fully dependent on donations.

It takes seven years to get nationally accredited, according to Maurer. She is wary of unaccredited individuals or groups who purchase assistance dog vests for animals - giving the impression that these animals have passed rigid regulations. She shared a heart-wrenching story about an Assistance Dogs of Hawaii service animal paired with a blind, wheelchair-bound resident. The dog made it possible for the previously homebound woman to get out and about. However, while the woman was dining in a restaurant with the assistance of her service animal, an unaccredited dog wearing a service vest attacked the Assistance Dogs of Hawaii animal, putting it out of commission.

Assistance Dogs of Hawaii also trains canines to serve as hospital facility dogs and courthouse dogs. In both roles, the animals provide comfort; helping children who are victims or witnesses to crimes find their voice throughout the difficult legal process and giving therapeutic benefit to patients at hospitals and nursing homes.

Scent detection is an exciting new area being explored by Assistance Dogs of Hawaii. The organization recently participated in a double-blind experiment in which dogs had a 99 percent accuracy rate in detecting various types of bacteria through scent, according to Maurer. The full results will be published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal, she said.

Assistance Dogs of Hawaii opened its doors to the public May 24 for guided tours, demonstrations and brief films at its facility in Makawao. Situated on nearly 3 acres, the site is called "Sadie's Place" in honor of the first service animal to graduate from the program.

Volunteers on hand included Sharon Dahlquist of Paia and John Tolbert, cluster general manager of Marriott properties on Maui and the Big Island. The pair are among volunteers who provide homes for animals as part of their training - which spans from puppyhood to 2 years old.

Tolbert's position as a resort manager puts him in the unique position of living at the Wailea Beach Marriott Resort and Spa. He said the dogs go with him to his office, meetings, everywhere. He said resort guests especially enjoy seeing the animals.

"It helps them get comfortable around people," said Tolbert of the dogs in training.

While Tolbert has been a volunteer for only the past six months, Dahlquist has been at it longer. She admitted it is hard to give the dogs up after they graduate from the program.

"You get used to it," she said. "When you consider the work they do, it's worth it."

Assistance Dogs of Hawaii currently has 20 animals in training. The organization works exclusively with Labrador and golden retrievers.

"They have the best temperament for training and have the highest chance of succeeding," said Maurer.

The dogs, purchased from a private breeder for \$3,000 each, represent 50 generations of breeding. It costs an additional \$1,000 to ship an animal to Hawaii.

The organization is selective in who gets paired with a service dog, and the training is designed to address specific needs.

The client also has to learn how to work with the animal and stays at

Sadie's Place to work with the animal under supervision by staff for a portion of the training.

Maurer introduced Akamai, a 2-year-old black Labrador retriever who will soon be paired with a client of the Wounded Warrior program who is confined to a wheelchair and has use of only his right arm.

Maurer simulated some of the movements and sounds that the client would use with Akamai.

The client would use his right hand, for instance, to give Akamai commands like getting a pair of socks out of the drawer, turning on the lights or getting the telephone. In all, the dogs learn approximately 90 commands.

"The big thing is they give companionship for people who live alone," said Maurer.

Next, she brought out Marshal, a 5-month old black Labrador retriever early in his training.

"The only correction is 'no,' said Maurer, while intern Jennifer Billot, from Nottingham, England, put Marshal through some of his training routine, which included turning a light on and off.

"He will go to a puppy-raiser home soon," said Maurer.

Assistance Dogs of Hawaii has a very good success rate. Maurer said in 15 years, there hasn't been a match that didn't work out.

For more information about the program, visit assistancedogshawaii.org or call 298-0167.

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