



CHRISTIE WILSON | The Honolulu Advertiser
 Jetson, a black Labrador, pulls Dennis Okada of Waipahu during a training session at Queen Ka'ahumanu Center on Maui.

Service dogs help ease the bumps in life's road

BY CHRISTIE WILSON
 Neighbor Island Editor

KAHULUI, Maui — It's nothing new for 11-year-old Morgan Malkovich to attract stares when she goes out in public.

The Maui girl suffers from Klippel-Trenaunay syndrome, a congenital circulatory disorder that has left her with markedly enlarged legs. She has difficulty walking more than a step or two at a time and must use a wheelchair.

"She loves people, but people would look at her and go in the other direction. It's very hard for her," said Morgan's mother, Laurna Malkovich of Kula.

Now when people look at Morgan, they see her new service dog, Max, and they're eager to meet the pair.

Morgan and Max, a gentle bear of a golden retriever, are

one of three teams that "graduated" this weekend from a training program run by Hawai'i Canines for Independence, a non-profit Maui organization founded by Maureen "Mo" Maurer.

In addition to guide dogs for the blind, service dogs can assist the disabled in a variety of ways, such as opening and closing doors, picking up dropped items, bringing a blanket or drink, or helping with store purchases. Some dogs are trained to aid the hearing-impaired by alerting them to sounds, such as a ringing telephone; others are seizure-alert dogs that can sense their owner's impending seizures and alert them so they can take precautions.

The dogs also can provide companionship and comfort.

Dennis Okada, 60, of Waipa-

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hu was on Maui last week to complete his training with Jetson, a frisky black Labrador. Okada was paralyzed from the waist down in a scuba-diving accident in 1986.

Jetson has a harness to pull Okada's wheelchair and can help him retrieve objects, giving Okada's wife some respite. "I have a feeling it's like a new period in my life has started," he said.

"Often when I transfer to my bed I forget something — the lights, a book or a blanket. He'll be a huge help. It will be so much easier," Okada said.

The third team is Andrew Richard, 13, and Indy, a German shepherd mix. Andrew has cerebral palsy, and the dog never leaves his side.

Maurer said Indy is special in a couple of ways. The canine was a pound puppy at the Maui Humane Society when he was recruited. Nearly all of the dogs she trains are golden retrievers or Labradors purchased from breeders.

It also was the first time Maurer trained a dog to respond to recorded voice commands. Since Andrew is unable to speak, he communicates with Indy by pressing buttons on a specially designed console that plays back recorded commands.

It can take up to two years and \$10,000 to train a service dog, which can master more than 100 commands. Maurer usually gets them as puppies 7 to 8 weeks old. After two to four months of basic training, the puppies are sent to live with volunteer "puppy raiser" families for up to a year. During this time they learn to socialize with people and undergo weekly training sessions.

They return to Maurer for six to 10 months of intensive work before a final three-week "team training camp" with their new owners.

The Malkoviches learned of Hawai'i Canines for Independence when they discovered their new neighbors were puppy-raisers for the organization. Laurna Malkovich said that when her daughter first saw the puppies, "her eyes were this big and she fell in love with them and talked about them for days."

Then in March, they passed by the Hawai'i Canines for Independence office at the Queen Ka'ahumanu Center in Kahului and saw Max sitting inside with Maurer, who invited them in. Morgan and Max began rolling around together on the floor, and extensive compatibility testing confirmed the two were a perfect match, Maurer said.

Aside from "being my buddy," Morgan said she wants to train Max to pick up her laundry and put it in the hamper.

But more than helping with

household chores, Max could mean an end to years of hurtful encounters with strangers. "Before, they'd look at me and think, 'She looks so weird, and she's in a wheelchair.' Now they think, 'Look, there's a dog with her,'" Morgan said.

Her mother recalled a recent visit to a video store with Max, when two little girls came up to talk to Morgan. Afterward her daughter was beaming. "It works! They're talking to me," Morgan exclaimed to her mother.

Okada said his association with the dozens of people involved with Hawai'i Canines for Independence has meant as much as getting a service dog. "These people are so other-centered. That is the thing that has

had the greatest impact on me — seeing people who truly care for others. It just hit me," he said.

Maurer said the organization, which relies on donations from individuals and business sponsors, recently purchased 2½ acres from Haleakalā Ranch to eventually build the state's first assistance dog training center.

For more information, contact Hawai'i Canines for Independence at (808) 250-5799; P.O. Box 790626, Pā'ia, HI 96779; visit hawaiicanines.org; or e-mail mo@hawaiicanines.org

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