

MAUI WEEKLY



A typical canine assistant.

Starr Tendo

Meet Max. He's a 3-year-old golden retriever with a special talent. Meet his yellow Labrador friend 10-month-old Kimo. They're assistance dogs in training and can carry a bag or bring a telephone to a disabled person.

They go to a special school on Maui called Hawai'i Canines for Independence (HCI). In its fourth year as a non-profit, the organization trains puppies to work as assistance dogs for individuals with serious physical disabilities. These certified dogs go everywhere with their owners—school, grocery shopping, the swimming pool, the office, even the movies.

They can help out in a number of situations, but some of HCI's graduates have gone beyond just helping with everyday tasks.

Maureen Maurer is founder and program director of HCI and is a professional service dog trainer with years of experience in

Dog geniuses

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These dogs are so smart that they save lives, fetch phones and answer the door.

we were hoping to help people regain independence or to encourage independence, but service dogs that have graduated have even saved peoples lives."

Freedom, an HCI grad, fetched the telephone when her owner, Melanie, fell

Melanie saved her life when her kitchen and her hair went up in flames.

Not every dog will do what Freedom did, and not every dog is suited to being a service dog. Golden retrievers and Labradors are the dogs best suited to this work. Once their personality, temperament, and physical health are screened, training can start as young as seven weeks. The puppy lives with a "raiser" who volunteers with the program for one and a half to two years. During this time the puppy will learn nearly 100 different commands.

"The dogs can be screened out at any time during the program," Maurer says, "if they have any health or temperament problems. Only about one percent of all dogs out there will get into the program and, nationwide, only about half of those graduate."

Susannah Christy is the program manager with HCI and has raised several puppies herself. "Some of the commands are really complex," she says. A dog may need to take something off a shelf in a store, for instance,

from her wheelchair. "It was also Freedom who opened the door to the firemen after Melanie called for help," says Maurer. On another occasion, Freedom's ability to get the tele-



Class of 2004. These dog trainers turn a puppy into a personal assistant.

lap. Then, when they come to the counter, he can put the item on the counter, then get a wallet out of the person's bag and put that on the counter. Then finally reverse everything by putting things back. That is a series of many different commands."

After being raised and trained by a volunteer, each puppy is matched up with a person on HCI's waiting list. Dog and owner then go through an intense two-week "boot camp" together. Maurer says they make sure the physical, environmental, emotional and activity level of the owner are well suited to the puppy before they are allowed to go home together. And that's only if the owner passes daily tests by 90 percent and succeeds in a final exam.

HCI mainly trains service dogs who are placed with the physically impaired. But they also have programs for therapy dogs that are placed with children and facility dogs that spend time at hospitals. They currently have an affiliated program with a school on the Mainland for hearing dogs and one in New Zealand for guide dogs. Dogs are placed with quadriplegics and paraplegics statewide.

Maurer says some people think the dogs have a hard working life. According to her, that couldn't be further than the truth. She points out that they spend all their time with someone they love, they go everywhere the owner goes, they get the best veterinary care, the best food and live in

wonderful homes. "They're doing something useful, and they're happy."

Maurer explains that the program's not just about the dogs. "Really, we're using psychology more than anything else. We use behavior modification and positive reinforcement. A lot of our work is with the people. It's understanding what they're going. They really become part of our family, and once they graduate, they call all the time to say how thankful they are."

As a volunteer, Christy admits it's not easy to see a puppy go. "Of course, it's hard to give them up since they become such a big part of your life, but the reward for us is seeing what an incredible bond they form with the people

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Her dog might be smarter than most shoppers at this Maui Mall. Page 9

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they're placed with, and how extraordinary that is... How much they can do for somebody who is disabled... How much it changes their lives. It's such a good feeling in the end. You get such an incredi-

ble feeling of accomplishment. You really have done something important, and I think that's what motivates people."

Queen Ka'ahumanu Center donated an office for Hawai'i Canines for Independence, and their main sponsors are Spencer Homes, Dowling Company Inc., and

Maui Veterinary Clinic.

They are currently raising funds to help build a new training facility on a 2.5-acre Upcountry property this year. To make a donation or to find out more about the organization call 250-5799 or visit their website at www.hawaiicanines.org. ★