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Posted on: Saturday, February 23, 2002

A fully trained dog at your service

By **Christie Wilson**
Neighbor Island Editor

A childhood injury that left Feanna Ishii a quadriplegic didn't stop her from trying scuba diving, mountain climbing and hot-air ballooning, or from having two children and becoming an accomplished artist.

Still, there were a few simple things she couldn't do for herself.

When Ishii, 46, would drop a paintbrush or a pen while working alone at her home in Kihei, Maui, she often had to wait an hour or longer for help until her husband returned or a neighbor dropped by.

"Now all I have to do is ask Knight to get the pen," she said.

Knight is a specially trained 18-month-old black Labrador who never leaves Ishii's side. He opens and closes doors for her, turns lights off and on, brings her a blanket when she's cold or a water bottle from the refrigerator when she's thirsty, and tugs on a strap to roll Ishii over in bed so she doesn't have to wake her husband, Koichi.

More important than the 90 commands he can carry out for Ishii is the enhanced sense of independence that Knight and other service dogs bring to those with spinal cord injuries, stroke victims, and people with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and other disabling conditions.

"This is the first time for me to be able to go out by myself and catch the bus with Knight and go shopping, meet friends or do business I have to do," Ishii said. "It's opened a whole new circle of friends. I don't know how many bus drivers I've been able to become friends with."

Knight and two other dogs are the most recent batch of "graduates" trained by Hawai'i Canines for Independence on Maui, one of three nonprofit agencies in the state that train assistance dogs.

There are different categories of assistance dogs: service dogs for people with physical disabilities; "hearing dogs" that assist the hearing-impaired by alerting them to sounds, such as a ringing telephone, a doorbell or a smoke alarm; guide dogs for the blind; seizure-alert dogs that can sense their owner's impending seizures and alert them so they can take precautions; and social therapy or facility dogs that provide love and companionship at hospitals, nursing homes and other settings.

Although assistance dogs have been employed on the Mainland for years, they are uncommon in Hawai'i. Ian Cox of the pre-eminent Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind's Guide Dog Services, which supplies dogs for use in the United States and around the world, said that according to the national per-capita average, there should be more than 200 guide dogs in Hawai'i, but there are fewer than a dozen.

Maureen "Mo" Maurer, who founded Hawai'i Canines for Independence with her husband, Will, had done volunteer work training guide dogs and also enjoyed working with the disabled through the Special Olympics. She said she took a "leap of faith" two years ago and abandoned her career as a certified public accountant to pursue her "dream job" of training assistance dogs full time. She attended the Assistance Dog Institute in Santa Rosa, Calif.,



Knight, a service dog, never leaves Feanna Ishii's side. The Maui woman, who is quadriplegic, relies on the black Labrador to switch lights on and bring her water to drink. More important, Knight gives her a sense of independence.

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Three agencies in Hawai'i
For details or to make a donation, these are the Hawai'i agencies that train assistance dogs:

- Hawai'i Canines for Independence, (808) 250-5799; P.O. Box 790626, Pa'ia, HI 96779; Web site hawaiiicanines.org; e-mail maurer@maui.net.
- Assistance Dogs of Hawai'i, (808) 889-0166; P.O. Box 474, Hawi, HI 96719; Web site www.assistancedogshawaii.org; e-mail elena@interpac.net.
- Hawai'i Fi-Do Service Dogs, 638-0200; 59-790 Kamehameha Highway, Hale'iwa, HI 96712; Web site www.hawaiifido.org; e-mail hifido99@hotmail.com.

and also trained in New Zealand, and became certified to start her own program on Maui.

It takes 18 months to screen and train service dogs for the disabled. Maurer first gets them as puppies 7 to 8 weeks old. They come from New Zealand, California and elsewhere, and once in a while Maurer will find a promising candidate at the Maui animal shelter.

She said golden retrievers and Labradors have proven to have the best temperament for the job; they are mellow, confident, intelligent and able to respond to clients who may not be able to move or who speak in a whisper.

After two to four months of basic training with Maurer, the puppies are sent to live with volunteer "puppy raiser" families for 10 to 12 months. During this time they learn to socialize with humans and undergo weekly training sessions. They are returned to Maurer for another four to six months of intensive work before a final three-week "team training camp" with their new owners.

Maurer graduated her first service dog last summer — a pooch named Peso who belongs to Pa'ia artist Darren Quinn — and so far has placed nine dogs and has six in various stages of training now.

Her clients find her through word of mouth. "There are so many more people who need service dogs than I could ever train," she said. On the Mainland, the average wait for a dog is five years.

Maurer does not charge her clients, since they already are facing immense medical and care expenses and she doesn't want to deny anyone who may not be able to pay. Hawai'i Canines for Independence relies on individual donors and businesses to underwrite the \$10,000 cost of acquiring, raising and training each dog. From that sum Maurer draws a small salary. Her business sponsors are Dowling Co., Spencer Homes and Maui Veterinary Clinic.

Along with Knight, one of the other dogs to graduate last month is a social therapy dog at the state's Kula Hospital, a facility for long-term care. Abby, a yellow Labrador, lives on-site with a member of the hospital's staff.

The third dog, Quincy, was matched with King Kekaulike High School counselor Michael Tom, 33, who broke his neck in a surfing accident 12 years ago. Maurer had contacted the state Division of Vocational Rehabilitation about finding a suitable client for the yellow Lab/golden retriever mix, and Tom's name came up.

Tom said he had never given much thought to having a service dog but is glad he decided to give it a try. "He gives me the freedom to be out in public and be more independent, self-sufficient and confident," Tom said.

Quincy also has proven to be useful to Tom at work.

"He helps break the ice when I'm meeting with students. A lot of people like animals, so right off we have something to talk about," he said.

Susan Luehrs of Hawai'i Fi-Do Service Dogs in Hale'iwa is the only such agency on O'ahu. Luehrs is a Department of Education special-education teacher who got into animal therapy in 1997 and also trained at the institute in Santa Rosa. Since establishing Hawai'i Fi-Do Service Dogs in 1999, she has placed four dogs and has three more in training.

For the past three years, Luehrs also has been running a vocational training program for at-risk youths at Kahuku High School using dogs from Hawai'i Fi-Do.

Elena Arnold of Assistance Dogs of Hawai'i on the Big Island, who trained with Luehrs in California, also works with high school students, and takes the dogs on visits to hospitals and other facilities.

Arnold has been a certified assistance dog trainer since 1999 and hopes to place her first graduates this year. Five are in training.



Knight, a "graduate" of Hawai'i Canines for Independence on Maui, closes a sliding door for Feanna Ishii at her home in Kihei.

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