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Posted December 6, 2014 - 1:00am

Canine Congrats | Graduation to be held for island's courthouse dog



Courthouse dog Faith gives Mitch Roth a high five. Photo courtesy of Faith - Hawaii County's Courthouse Dog facebook page

By Carolyn Lucas-Zenk
West Hawaii Today
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Hawaii's courthouses are going to the dogs. By next year, Hawaii will become the first state in the country to have a courthouse dog in every jurisdiction, according to Maui-based nonprofit Assistance Dogs of Hawaii.

Here on the Big Island, the top dog marking her territory in the legal profession is a 2-year-old black Labrador named Faith. June 30 was her first day of work with the Hawaii County Prosecuting Attorney Office as a courthouse dog.

Wearing a blue vest bearing Assistance Dogs of Hawaii's insignia, Faith is a companion and confidante to children and adults who have endured or seen traumatic crimes. She has great talent for soothing victims and witnesses, helping them stay calm as they find their voice through the difficult legal process, said Prosecuting Attorney Mitch Roth.

Faith has empowered people to tell their accounts of what they experienced. This in turn helps move cases



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forward by providing information or proof beyond a reasonable doubt and aiding in bringing justice, as well as assisting in keeping our communities safe and healthy, Roth said.

If every dog has its day, Faith's would be Dec. 14, when she will be among the six special canines graduating from Assistance Dogs of Hawaii's training camp at its Makawao campus. The dogs were matched with their partners and are now graduating after completing training, as well as passing rigorous health and temperament screenings.

Other interesting canine graduates include Emmitt, a Golden Retriever and therapy dog that brings friendship to children living at the Maui Homeless Resource Center in Wailuku, and Abe, Aka and Angel, Labrador litter mates known as "The A Team" who are medical scent detection dogs participating in a groundbreaking study at the Rehab Hospital of the Pacific in Honolulu.

Faith is the 53rd courthouse dog in the nation. On the mainland, these dogs go into courtrooms and sit in the witness box as people testify. The victims and witnesses often find themselves petting and stroking the dogs to calm their nerves. "Dogs like Faith don't have to speak or bark to make an impact. Their presence alone has been shown to reduce a stressed person's heart rate, reduced the fear and provide the support they need to get through the task at hand," Roth said.

Faith has not been used in live trial yet. She has mostly assisted in interviews and greeting people arriving for court proceedings islandwide. Faith's presence has also brought a lot of joy for those working in the stressful legal environment, Roth said.

Faith was provided to Hawaii County completely free of charge, thanks to Assistance Dogs of Hawaii. While she stays with her handler, investigator Pat Breault, Faith is owned by Assistance Dogs of Hawaii until she retires from her duties and is eligible for adoption, which is something Breault says she plans to do.

Breault called it a privilege to be Faith's handler and to help provide this "valuable service." She said Faith is "very intuitive" always knowing who needs her the most without being told. Breault has witnessed Faith transform people and give them courage to describe the horrors they experienced. Shy and scared keiki become chatterboxes. Even the body language of nervous or frighten adults tend to change, all with Faith's help.

Breault credited Roth for believing in the use of a professionally trained dog to provide emotional support to everyone in the justice system and for bringing the program to Hawaii Island. Roth knew about courthouse dogs through the Courthouse Dogs Foundation and the Honolulu Prosecutor's Office, which has successfully been using a Labrador named Pono for four years to help victims, especially children.

Assistance Dogs of Hawaii is a well-known leader in providing service dogs to children and adults, particularly for people with physical disabilities, in the state. Since its inception in 2000, the nonprofit, founded by Will and Mo Maurer, has graduated more than 50 service dog teams that are making a difference in the lives of their partners and their communities. What makes the organization even more remarkable is it provides the dogs for free. "This nonprofit is providing a great service in the state," Breault said.

The nonprofit carefully selects dogs base on breed, health and temperament. Training for selected dogs begin at 7 weeks old and four stages must be completed, which takes up to two years to complete. Dogs learn more than 90 commands and are trained to perform specific skills that assist their partners.

Partners attend an intensive camp with the dogs they're matched with. The teams work together and partners must memorize commands the dogs already know. Handlers also learn canine psychology, health care and how to bring out the best in their canine partner. Assistance Dogs of Hawaii provides free follow-up visits and training for the life of each team. Dogs also continually learning new skills that may be needed to help their partners.

To learn more about Faith, see her facebook page and visit assistancedogshawaii.org.

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