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Paws 4 Liberty: Dogs Helping People

Story and Photos by Frances Goodman



It's early evening in the backyard of a home near Forest Hill Boulevard and State Road 7. Dogs and handlers can be seen practicing heeling on the grassy lawn. An instructor calls out, "Put your dogs in a STAY." Everyone comes to a halt as the handlers give the commands.

What might seem to be a typical obedience class is not at all typical, however. The dogs are ten-month-old German Shepherd littermates with a destiny. Their handlers are volunteer "foster parents" who are giving them basic training.

If all goes well, these adolescent pups will grow up to become assistance dogs for physically or mentally challenged clients who otherwise might not be able to afford one. When they are 14 to 16 months old, they will be ready to begin specialized training as service dogs – canine companions who can retrieve dropped objects, help someone into or out of bed, even pull a wheelchair if necessary.

The dogs and their volunteer handlers are in the "Paws 4 Liberty" program founded by Heidi Spirazza, an occupational therapist who also does hippotherapy with disabled clients at Vinceremos Therapeutic Riding Center in Loxahatchee.

Spirazza has seen the power of the human animal connection and believes service animals can increase independence and enrich life. She founded Paws 4 Liberty with that as her goal.

Not-for-profit status

Paws 4 Liberty, Inc., received its 501(c)(3) standing as a not-for-profit organization in March 2006, Spirazza said proudly. There are presently eight future service dogs in the program.

"Right now there's nobody getting a salary. I'm paying my trainer next to nothing and everything is pretty much on a volunteer basis," Spirazza said.

"I am paying for all the dogs' food, bedding equipment, medical, etc. while they're staying with their fosters. "A lot of service dog organizations have foster families that pay for the dog's own expenses. But I didn't want to do that. It's enough for them to put all their time and energy into giving them homes and coming to training. I didn't want to put that burden on them."



The operating capital Spirazza hopes to raise includes not only dollars but volunteers. "Donations, of course, but we also need future puppy raisers for 14 to 16 months, puppy sitters for when our families go out of town, and puppy walkers, to take puppies to Wal Mart, Home Depot, the mall, and into their homes to expose them to different environments and events.

"As future service dogs they need to be acclimated to being out in public where they're going to be when they graduate.

They need that exposure when they're young and they need it often—numerous times a week.

"Right now I have five puppies at my house, and my treasurer comes over to help walk them. It would be so nice to have a qualified puppy walker call and say, 'Hey, I would love to pick up a puppy, walk it, and socialize it for half an hour or hour, or even just around the block.'"

Screening

"Volunteering as a puppy foster home or walker does involve a careful screening process," Spirazza said. If there are too many dogs in a home already, a foster might not be able to give sufficient attention to a trainee pup. The house and yard also are assessed for such things as yard security and no poisonous plants.

Still, she adds, "The families don't have to have an immense amount of experience, they just have to have a passion for what our mission is—to raise and train service dogs for children and adults in Palm Beach County."

Unlike some organizations that use shelter pets, Spirazza is breeding her own line of service dogs from a quality German Shepherd line she acquired from a former member of the Palm Beach County sheriff's canine unit. She likes the German Shepherd breed for its "attitude of servitude," she said.

"I wanted a good-quality, stable, level-headed breed that, if I'm going to put in the time and effort, I know I'll come out with a good dog that will be able to work." The total cost per dog for producing a qualified service animal is between \$15,000 and \$20,000.

Public acceptance

In addition to breeding, training and providing service dogs, Spirazza has another goal. She wants the public and businesses to become more accepting of service dogs in public places, including those in training.



"I want to help people understand the rights of service dogs and their handler/owners—their rights to public access. This is provided for in the American Disabilities Act and in the Florida statutes.

"There are also rights for the trainers. We have the same rights to every public building as well as any disabled person."

Not all disabilities are visible, and just because someone is not using a wheelchair, cane or walker does not mean they don't have a disability, she noted.

"The dog does not even have to be wearing a service vest," she added.

Paws 4 Liberty foster families and puppy socializers have encountered some problems, but most people have been "absolutely wonderful."

"The mall welcomes us—they know us."

Although numerous service dog organizations exist around the county, some with animals here, Spirazza thinks she has the only such organization in Palm Beach County. She is quick to point out that service dogs should not be confused with therapy dogs.

"Therapy dogs go to institutions, nursing homes, and such, and visit people. A service dog is with the client twenty-four/seven." Nor are they primarily seeing-eye dogs. "They are for physically, mentally or emotionally disabled people—anyone."

Although some of the families who will be recipients of service dogs hold fund-raising events and contribute as they can to the training and upkeep cost, Spirazza says there is no charge to them.

"There is no charge to any of the clients. Some are helping to raise money, and I encourage that. But I'm not going to charge. If they can pay, okay, but most can't."

"The big thing is we need to make it a wonderful match between the dog and the person."

For more information visit Spirazza's web site at www.paws4liberty.org, or call (561) 644-6292.



Author Frances Goodman is a professional pet care writer, dog obedience trainer and animal expert. She is a native Floridian, a former writer for the Palm Beach Post, and has hosted a weekly radio talk show on pets.