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THESE DOGS ALLOW A BIT OF FREEDOM

Paws for Independence trains homeless dogs to work for people who are disabled.

RICHMOND—The big dog walks slowly, matching her pace to the roll of the motorized wheelchair climbing the ramp to the coffee shop. The woman in the wheelchair, Terry Jodoin, likes stopping here for coffee and gossip, and the big dog will make it possible for her to do so with no one else's help.

The dog, a 90-pound German Shepherd named Carry, knows how to open doors, pay at cash registers, turn on light switches and pick up dropped items such as a napkin or a television remote. For a woman in a wheelchair, a friendly dog who can perform these formerly simple tasks is a godsend.

Jodoin maneuvers her wheelchair to a stop near a table, a signal for Carry to lay down.

"Am I near her tail?" Jodoin says, adjusting the chair. "I don't want to run over her."

"No, she's got it flipped around," says Christina Johnson, one of the two women who taught Carry how to be a "service dog" for the disabled.

Johnson and a friend, Suzannah Dickinson, have chartered a group called Paws for Independence to train homeless dogs to live and work with people with disabilities. The two dog trainers adopted Carry from the Exeter pound and they've taken a few dogs from the Cranston Animal Shelter for training in their program.

Over coffee at Coffeetalk.com in the Wyoming section of Richmond, Johnson explained that she doesn't take just any dog in the *Paws for Independence* program. A dog has to show her the proper 'body language' while she walks the aisle between cages at a dog pound.

Said Dickinson, "They have to have happy, friendly, hi-how you-doing body language."

Carry passed the body language test at the Exeter shelter, so Johnson pulled her aside for testing. First she put some kibble on the floor, then swept it aside with a rubber hand to see whether Carry would bite; she didn't.

She pulled Carry by the tail, stuck her thumbs in the dog's gums, held her up by the back leg; despite bad experiences with prior owners, the dog took it all as good fun.

Johnson also studied Carry to see how bright she was. Johnson doesn't want a dumb dog, but she won't take a dog that's too smart. "Smart dogs, they change the rules," Johnson said. "If they're too bright, they get bored" practicing the same tasks over and over—flicking a light switch, shoving open a door. "We like moderate intelligence."

“And not to ambitious socially,” said Dickinson. “We don’t want the CEO of dogville.”

Carr’s friendly, passive personality comes in handy at the coffee shop, where 1 year old Lindsey Larisa hangs out with her parents. Lindsey loves mauling the big dog, who takes in stride the push and pull of little hands.

Carry is the first service dog to graduate from a dog pound to a disabled person’s house under the *Paws for Independence* program. Johnson has also taken a corgi from death row in Cranston and trained her as a therapy dog for a North Attleboro nursing home; one dog she adopted from Cranston now works as a bomb-sniffing dog for the U.S. Customs Service; and a Rottweiler that washed out of her program because “she wanted to be someone’s cuddlebug” now lives with a family.

Paws for Independence hopes to raise enough money to build a 20-cage kennel to house service dogs in various stages of training. In the meantime, Delmyra Kennels in Exeter is donating board and training space for dogs in the program.

Johnson said it’s not that difficult to teach a friendly dog to pick up dropped items, flick switches, to take cash or credit in its muzzle and present it to a cashier. It just takes time, nearly a year in Carry’s case.

“Dogs feel the same emotions as we feel—some of them like to cuddle, some of them are friendly, some of them are cranky all the time. They get angry, they get happy.”

But, she said, it’s a mistake to “anthropomorphize” a dog. “A human’s perception of an interaction with a dog can be very different than the dog’s perception of the interaction.” Thus a parent may view a baby hugging a dog as a sign of affection while the dog may view the hug as an act of aggression.

When she trains a dog as a service dog or as a therapy dog, Johnson makes sure that the dog exhibits signs that it enjoys the work; otherwise she trains it for some other task or gives it to a good home.

“Carry is an outgoing, very happy worker,” says Johnson. “She’s thoughtful and she’s very perceptive.”

A year ago, happiness was in short supply for both Carry and Jodoin. In January 2001 someone opened the sliding door of a van and tossed a puppy to the pavement on Route 2. The dog bounced and rolled and came to rest outside the Exeter Animal Shelter.

The pup wore a tattoo in her ear that showed she had once lived in the Providence Animal Shelter. So Carry was a two-time loser, abandoned to a dog pound for a second time.

At the same time, Jodoin was adjusting to life without legs—both had been amputated up to her pelvis to stem an infection from a wound she’d suffered in a car crash. The wound and infection also killed the nerves in her arms and in one hand, basically leaving her a paraplegic.

“Dropping things is a big problem,” says Jodoin. Before Carry, if Jodoin dropped her television remote she had to live with whatever was on the screen until her husband came home or her daughters stopped by. Now Carry picks the remote off the floor and hands it back.

“Knowing she’s here with me when I’m alone is just a wonderful thing,” Jodoin says.

Carry moved in with Jodoin full time in December, after about a year of training with Johnson and Dickinson. One of Jodoin's daughters always accompanies her when she leaves the house, so she doesn't yet need Carry to do all of the things she's capable of doing such as paying cashiers and opening doors.

Yet Carry makes it possible for Jodoin to travel independently.

"She's so wonderful," says Jodoin, looking down at Carry, who returns the gaze. "She just makes my heart happy."