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Duo trains dogs to help, comfort

By *CHRISTIE BLECK*
Editor

LESLIE — Beth Spanski was climbing down a staircase when her German shepherd dog Magic blocked her movement.

At first Spanski was annoyed, but then she felt a seizure coming on. Fortunately for her, Magic detected her seizure before she did, and probably kept her from tumbling down the stairs.

But that's what Magic was supposed to do.

Magic is one of the dogs Spanski and her business partner, Lori Grigg, have trained as part of their new nonprofit, FBI ("For Better Independence") Assistance Dogs.

Spanski experiences seizures as a result of brain surgery, so Magic helps her in her daily routine, including acting as a "brace dog" that Spanski leans on when she gets up from the floor.

Spanski and Grigg have more than 50 years of combined experience working in the assistance dog business. Spanski, a certified service dog trainer, has a bachelor's degree in psychology and worked for three years as a zookeeper at the Detroit Zoological Institute, training chimpanzees to accept arm injections. Grigg also is a certified service dog trainer and worked for two years training police K-9 officers and their new dogs in Plymouth.

Four kinds of dogs

FBI provides trained assistance dogs as one of four types: service dogs, hearing dogs, facility dogs and home therapy dogs.

Service dogs help a person with a physical disability and retrieve dropped items, pull a wheelchair and open and close doors.

Hearing dogs help a hearing-impaired person, alerting the person to sounds in the home.

Facility dogs work with clergy, educational, mental health and health care professionals. These dogs have access only to the facility for which they were trained.

Home therapy dogs provide companionship to a person who has physical, cognitive or developmental disabilities and who might not qualify for a fully working assistance dog.

Spanski, who lives with her husband Gary (who helps manage the business) on a 20-acre farm near Leslie, chose that spot for a reason.

"We wanted land for dogs to run and play," she said.

Spanski and Grigg, who lives in Fenton, are seeing more results stemming from their hard work. They trained what will be the first hospital-owned dog in Michigan, which will belong to Henry Ford Hospital in West Bloomfield.

For such dogs, the two also train facility staff so they can best handle the dogs.

"They want dogs to have a soothing effect," Spanski said, "which dogs do."

Grigg said a new "hot" field in the assistance-dogs world is training dogs for use in funeral homes. And if ever there's a time when "grief dogs" are needed to provide nurturing calm, it's after a loved one has died and relatives need emotional support.

"They're drawn to the dog," Grigg said.

A labor of love

Spanski and Grigg receive "donor dogs" from local breeders, and subsist on money donations, fundraising and dog-class fees. Grigg said the Whitmore Lake Rod and Gun Club even has taken FBI on as a charity. Volunteers also are an important part of FBI.

But even if the two aren't making a whole lot of money from their business — yet — the financial rewards might be secondary to their passion: making life easier for people.

"What we want is to allow persons to get the most of their life," Grigg said.

A Pomeranian named Gidget that's being trained by FBI might do just that with a hearing-impaired person. For example, a hearing dog would lead a deaf person to a crying baby in the home.

"The benefit of hearing dogs is that they can be any-sized dog," Grigg said.

Spanski noted that Gidget has the right personality for being a hearing dog.

The small dog, which is being trained to react to sound, is attentive and active.

"All the service dogs — they love their job," Spanski said.

On the other hand, service dogs tend to be larger because they might be required to pull a heavy item such as a wheelchair. Also, most are golden retrievers.

"Ninety percent of their job is retrieving," Grigg said.

Grigg said positive reinforcement, including tasty treats, is used to train dogs to perform various functions.

"We have to have a dog that, number one, is a 'dumpster with lips,'" Grigg said.

The first training step involves getting the dog to react to noise, for example. Step two involves getting it to paw a person to alert it to the noise. For the third step, the dog is trained to bring that person to the source of the sound.

For service dogs, Grigg acknowledged, more training time is needed because more tasks are involved.

People don't understand how assistance dogs can do some of the things they do, such as detecting a seizure. What also might amaze people are the variety of physical tasks a dog such as Magic can accomplish, such as picking up a flat quarter from a wooden floor or flicking on a lightswitch (the Spanski house has the scratches near a switch to prove it).

Follow-up support

Spanski said that once a dog is placed in a home, she and Grigg will work the dog in that home.

"Our job is done when our dogs and handler are a team," Grigg said.

Spanski noted that each person's disability is unique and it might progress, so they might have to teach the dog new tasks.

All of this training, though, doesn't come cheap as it typically costs FBI \$10,000 per dog. Spanski and Grigg hope to develop their own "breeding stock" for use as assistance dogs.

But the two women continue to reap important rewards from their vocation. As Grigg said, "We get to see the final product of what this dog is doing for a person."

Send donations for FBI to Spanski at 475 Vaughn Road, Leslie, MI 49251, or visit www.ForBetterIndependence.org.

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