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Life

## VOICES OF DISABILITY: Dog trainers create nonprofit to help disabled

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Of The Oakland Press

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Dog trainers Lori Grigg, her friend Beth Spanski and a few others have a dream that, if it becomes reality, will improve the lives of thousands of disabled people.

The two women, who have years of experience in training dogs, have formed a nonprofit organization, For Better Independence Assistance Dogs.

They plan to place the dogs in facilities such as nursing homes, schools and hospitals to help boost the morale of students, patients and the elderly. The facilities will own the dogs much as I own Norton, who has been pulling me along the road of life for the past 30 months.

I have never received a greater gift than this 81-pound mix of Labrador and retriever. I am a real sucker for his big brown eyes, giving him too many treats. I often tell people if I ever lose my job as a journalist, I could rent Norton out for about \$75 an hour because he is a chick magnet — and can attract guys, if that is one's preference.

But getting back to FBI Assistance Dogs, after June 1, 2009, Grigg and Spanski will train dogs to become service animals to help people with disabilities get through each day a little bit easier.

They formed a seven-member board of directors late this year and are in the beginning stages of creating a business plan. They hope to receive donations from the public to get off the ground and improve the daily lot of some of the 250,000 disabled people in Oakland County.

“Our mission, at first, is to provide dogs to health-care professionals to help patients meet their treatment goals,” Spanski said in a visit to The Oakland Press with Henry, a black Labrador. “The dogs actually help the staff and the visitors at the hospital. The dogs help reduce stress for the patients, their family members and doctors and nurses.”

“All of our dogs have passed the therapy dog test,” Grigg said. “That test includes the Canine Good Citizen test that is given through the American Kennel Club.”

It makes sure the dogs have had health clearances, which include checking to make sure they have good hips and elbows and are in excellent overall condition.

The facility animals also have their eyes and hearts checked by veterinary specialists, Grigg said.

When a dog is placed in a school, for example, it can assist counselors conduct therapy sessions for students.

“The dogs seem to make the children more relaxed,” she added. “The children also feel more at ease talking about a traumatic

experience when a dog is around.”

The counselors and teachers also give students positive enforcement when they use therapy dogs.

They can earn reading sessions or play sessions with the dog or take a four-legged pal for a walk, Spanski said.

“Our training method is to place the dog in a facility setting, and we will shadow the handlers and the activities of the dog and the facility for one or two months,” Grigg said.

Both women said the facility dogs can be provided to hospitals, nursing homes and schools at a cost far cheaper than the \$39,000 cost of a guide dog from Leader Dogs for the Blind in Rochester Hills or the estimated \$18,000 Norton cost.

Many times, the dogs are provided to those who need them through donations from the public or fundraisers.

“We’re thinking that a facility dog will be about \$6,000 and it will cost about \$10,000 for a service animal,” Grigg said.

“The idea that the dog is owned by the facility makes everyone feel like it is their dog,” Spanski said. “We will come out and do a demonstration for any group considering donating money to our cause, which is to maintain and help increase the independence and happiness of people with disabilities or those in hospitals, nursing homes, schools and assisted living centers.”

The FBI Assistance Dogs nonprofit is being mentored by a school in Swanton, Ohio, which received a facility dog for the students from Assistance Dogs of America Inc.

Henry will be placed in mid-March at the new Henry Ford Hospital in West Bloomfield.

“We don’t want the dream of providing facility and assistance dogs to die just because the nation is in a recession,” Spanski said.

Norton and I couldn’t agree more.

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