



DEB WOOD

The Oregonian

▶ [Click here to subscribe!](#)

» More From The Oregonian

Looking for a few good dogs

Recruiters are looking for qualified canines and their owners for training as therapy pets

Tuesday, August 31, 2004

Hilary and Berdie are yellow Labradors that were looking for a purpose in life. "They are career-change dogs that were raised to be guide dogs, but didn't pass the program," says their owner, Anne Stronko of Beaverton. "They couldn't just sit around."

Last year Stronko saw a notice for the recruitment days for the Breeder's Choice canine cheerleaders. This annual event gives people a chance to learn more about animal-assisted therapy and to have a trained evaluator take a look at owners and their dogs to see what it would take for them to make the grade as a therapy team.

"The evaluator said that Hilary and Berdie would make great therapy dogs," Stronko says. Both dogs later passed a Delta Society test as a pet partner therapy team, and now they are busy volunteers. (The Delta Society is the largest organization on the West Coast to test possible therapy animals.) Stronko is a teacher and developed a program at her school where children practice reading to her dogs. She also volunteers at Marquis Vintage Suites at Piedmont, an assisted-living facility.

"Animal-assisted therapy affords me the opportunity to spend time with my dogs and it gives them a purpose," Stronko says. "It makes the dogs and me feel good."

This weekend brings recruitment days for canine cheerleaders to the Portland area. The event is sponsored by the Breeder's Choice pet-food company, which holds the events in several cities in conjunction with the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure for breast cancer.

Although other animals, including cats, birds and rabbits can make excellent therapy animals, this weekend's events are limited to dogs. Organizers are looking for dogs that are friendly to other dogs to participate, says Lisa Orth of Vernonia, one of the event planners. Last year's event attracted about 50 dogs. Dogs should be at least a year old, on a regular (not retractable) leash and not wearing a prong collar.

Once you get to the event, an experienced Delta Society pet partner will talk to you about animal-assisted therapy. "We'll ask some questions, such as what kind of venue you'd like to visit," Orth says. She and her Siberian husky Jag provide pet-safety training to schools and crisis relief through the Red Cross, among other activities.

The next step will be a visit with a Delta Society evaluator, who won't do a full therapy dog test but will spend enough time so participants get a good idea of what areas you might need to work on.

"Depending on the space available and on the comfort level of the dog," says evaluator Josiah Whitaker, "we'll probably do about half of the exercises in the test." He emphasizes this is just for fun and to give people information; there is no passing or failing. "We want to get an idea of where people are and encourage them to go forward," he says.

Therapy dogs need to have good basic training and, above all else, enjoy people. Some of the exercises that might be covered during the mini-evaluations are basic obedience skills such as sit, down and stay, and aptitude tests such as the evaluator petting your dog, hugging him or petting him in clumsy and overly exuberant ways. (For more information about the Delta Society's pet partner therapy test, visit www.deltasociety.org.)

The mini-evaluation will end with a "goodie bag" from Breeder's Choice and fliers from Portland-area animal-assisted therapy groups. The organizers' goal is to get more people interested in becoming therapy teams with their dogs. "If 100 people come, and just 10 follow through, that would be great," says Deborah Smith, a Breeder's Choice communications consultant.

People who do therapy work with their dogs will tell you it's an activity that's full of joy and a sense of accomplishment. Says Orth, "It's extremely rewarding to have my best friend by my side to volunteer for my community."

Deborah Wood: TaoBowwow@aol.com