

PUPPY TO PARTNER: Nonprofit paws4people trains dogs to aid humans

CHAPEL HILL — The puppies make the kids laugh now; they slide along the slick gymnasium floor and bump into one another in their excitement.

But soon, they'll be fulfilling their destiny as service dogs, matched with anyone from a child in a wheelchair to a military veteran. The three puppies that visit Phoenix Academy each Monday as part of their socialization training have just grown big enough to wear their tiny vests that say "Assistance dog in training."

The puppies, which are socialized through the Puppy Development Center at The Farm at Penny Lane, will be trained for more than nine months as part of a nonprofit called paws4people, which matches dogs to clients who need service animals.

The puppy development center, forged through a partnership among UNC School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and UNC Center for Excellence in Community Mental Health, has been open since January and is paws4people's first expansion from its puppy development headquarters in Wilmington.

Golden retriever and Labrador retriever puppies arrive at the center at about six weeks old and will continue to be socialized through outings until they are 16 to 20 weeks old.

"Anywhere that a service dog may go with his or her human, we try to get to," said Sunny Westerman, program manager for the Puppy Development Center.

A group of puppies could stop at big-box stores, restaurants, police stations, fire stations — or, in the case of puppies BO, HELO and TONEY — at Phoenix Academy.

The students at Phoenix Academy let the puppies scoot around, then scoop them up in exchange for puppy kisses.

"They're just fluffy," said Chantil Tate, a senior.

But it's not all fun and cuddles, said freshman Alex Martinez. The students have to expose the puppies to different stimuli, such as throwing chairs to get them used to loud noises.

Terry Henry, chief operations officer for paws4people, visited Phoenix Academy Monday with his service dog, Campbell to share with students the importance of the puppies' future.

Henry's daughter, Kyria, started paws4people about 16 years ago when she was just 12 years old.

She learned to train dogs and started bringing them to nursing homes and special education classrooms. She started off with four dogs. Since then, the nonprofit has opened a training center in West Virginia where they're able to train hundreds of dogs. Operating in 24 states, paws4people has facilitated more than 400 working pairs across the country.

The training comes at a hefty expense — \$35,000 per dog — and dogs are provided free of charge to clients who pass the application and training process. By the time dogs graduate the program, they know how to perform various tasks for their owners, like retrieve items from the refrigerator. Dogs who are partnered with nonverbal clients are taught to read flashcards.

Because of this expense, demand for assistance dogs overwhelms the supply. For every 90 applications paws4people receives, Henry said, one client receives a dog.

Henry, a veteran who served in the Navy and the Air Force, has an assistance dog of his own. He has struggled with drug addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder, but working with dogs helps him through.

He's had his third service dog, Campbell, about a year. Henry said Campbell helps him "control, regulate and mitigate (his) PTSD symptoms."

Campbell and other service dogs use scents to sense physiological changes in their owner's body triggered by stress or an impending breakdown. Then, the dogs can help their owners calm down before the breakdown occurs.

Campbell also wakes Henry up at night when he experiences night terrors.

For other veterans, Campbell said, having an assistance dog has helped them with suicidal thoughts.

Puppies continue to be socialized until they're about 16 weeks old, and then move to a training program in prisons in West Virginia.

After the dogs choose their clients, they and their clients undergo training through UNC-Wilmington's undergraduate Assistance Dog Training Program.

A dog training program for graduate students will begin at the UNC School of Medicine next fall.

Westerman said she has watched dogs choose their clients, which she described as a moving experience that really brought home the puppies' mission.

“Puppies are cute and we’re having fun, but they really will go on to save someone’s life or play an integral role in someone’s life,” she said.



TONEY, a 9-week-old puppy, sits attentively during socialization hour. TONEY will stay at the Puppy Development Center at The Farm at Penny Lane until the puppies are ready to undergo training in West Virginia. (The Chapel Hill Herald/Katie Jansen)



Ken Wormack, an EC assistant teacher at Phoenix Academy, sits with BO, a 7-week-old puppy who will eventually become an assistance dog to a veteran or civilian with disabilities. (The Chapel Hill Herald/Katie Jansen)



Terry Henry, chief operations officer for paws4people, is pictured with his service dog, Campbell. Campbell helps Henry, a veteran, with the symptoms of his post-traumatic stress disorder. (The Chapel Hill Herald/Katie Jansen)



Alex Martinez, a freshman at Phoenix Academy, holds BO, one of the three puppies who come to Phoenix Academy weekly to be socialized before their assistance dog training. (The Chapel Hill Herald/Katie Jansen)