

in their
Debt

By Jen Reader

Paws for
EMPPOWERMENT

Lab puppy joins team of Canine Court Advocates – and a cat – that supports victims of domestic violence.



Cheri and Rune

A five-month-old chocolate Lab named Rune already has a job, and she loves it.

Rune was only a few months old when she started supporting victims of domestic violence who needed to testify in court. On her first day as part of the PAWS for Empowerment team at the nonprofit Crisis Center North (CCN), a domestic violence counseling and educational resource center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the little Lab sat next to a woman while she testified against her abuser.

Initially the woman pet Rune, but as she answered questions from lawyers about the violence in her home, she grew increasingly upset and started wringing her hands. So the little Lab crawled underneath the chair and laid her head across the woman's feet.

At that moment, Rune's handler, Cheri Herschell, a Canine Intervention Specialist with CCN, knew her dog was a natural.

"I thought it was the most adorable thing ever, and the sweetest little move because she essentially had no training on this. She was very young," Herschell said. "But clearly, she knew that this victim needed her to be there,



Rune with Ari (center) and Penny.

and even when the victim wasn't able to touch her, Rune still wanted to maintain that physical contact with her."

Canine Court Advocates like Rune have served female and male victims of domestic violence – and their children – since 2010 as part of CCN's PAWS for Empowerment program.

The first dog, a spaniel mix named Penny, helped a young boy find the courage to enter counseling and, once inside, share his story. The program officially launched soon after and proved so successful that a few years later, a Lab-Australian shepherd mix named Ari joined the team, along with Thea, a Sphynx cat who works in children's therapy.

The animals are trained in basic obedience, but for the most part, handlers let them follow their intuition to offer whatever is needed. "We really just allow the dogs to use their intuitiveness in how they feel and what they feel like a victim needs," Herschell said. "And we've really found that they've never been wrong."

Rune accompanies victims to the county magistrate court one to two times a week. Herschell noted that the waiting room and courtroom itself are small, which can make for uncomfortable situations when a victim and perpetrator are seated in such close quarters.

In these cases, Rune and the other Canine Court Advocates are a welcome distraction. In fact, victims typically mention on evaluation forms that not only did the dog make them feel more comfortable, they'd be more likely to return to court again if they knew a dog would be there.

"One of our biggest struggles as legal advocates is getting people to accept the help that's out there. There are many reasons that victims may choose not to participate in the legal process – whether they're afraid of retribution or they don't have anywhere to go – so they feel like their only option is to not press charges and to stay with the perpetrator," Herschell said. "But the dogs really tend to break the ice for me when I'm in court. I'm not a legal advocate – I'm this nice lady with this really cute puppy who wants to say hi."

That cute puppy is part of the sixth generation of Labs Herschell has bred. While Rune instinctively understands that when she's in a vest and working she should be well-mannered and calm, at home she loves playing with her mom, Narya, retrieving bumpers, and generally acting like an exuberant Lab puppy.

"She's a wonderful dog," Herschell said. "Being part of helping victims of domestic violence overcome what they've been through is really special, and we're proud to be a part of it."

Grace Coleman, executive director of CCN and owner of Penny and Ari, said the center typically serves more than 2,000 people each year. Her father was a veterinarian who was fond of the adage, "A good dog is a dog that has a job."

"When he died, in his honor, I started the program," she said. "I always wanted to work with dogs, and this was an amazing way." She's delighted that Rune joined



PHOTO COURTESY OF DANTE MASSEY



the PAWS for Empowerment team and expects the little Lab will continue to blossom in the program as Penny and Ari have.

Penny once blocked a perpetrator who was angrily and swiftly approaching a victim, and she uses body language to communicate to counselors whether a victim suffers from anxiety or depression. She has even alerted her handler when a gun was present in the courtroom. Ari leans into victims who need comfort and, unlike most canines, establishes an unwavering gaze when working with survivors.

"I'm so excited about Rune because we started her from birth. She was just twelve or fourteen weeks old when she went inside of the court. We have never started earlier on a canine than we have with Rune," she said. "I have no doubt that this dog is going to fly because of it."

The timing couldn't be better since the coronavirus pandemic has led to a national rise in domestic violence, and increased isolation has made it even more challenging for victims to escape their abusers. In Allegheny County, domestic violence increased 63 percent in the pandemic's first two months alone, Coleman noted.

In response, CCN worked hard to get food and emergency resources to victims and developed a text hotline, since victims usually can't talk on the phone when perpetrators within earshot. Often, advocates would arrange to meet victims in parking lots or other outdoor spaces. Thea's handler even started meditation Zoom sessions for clients since the cat is clicker trained to close her eyes and reopen them when cued.

"My team amazed me," Coleman said. "The pandemic created obstacles, and it also created opportunities."

Coleman hopes other domestic violence organizations will start including animals in their programs. She's spoken at numerous conferences about the subject, and the PAWS for Empowerment program has garnered widespread accolades and awards.

"It's a shame more people don't work with dogs, because I think what they've brought to this program is magic," she said. "These animals can really be an invaluable tool in addressing trauma. I'm really excited for Rune to make her mark on this program during her time with us." 🐾

For more information, visit www.crisiscenternorth.org.

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW NEEDS HELP

- If you are in a life-threatening emergency, call 911
- For safety planning for you and your pet, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), or chat live at www.thehotline.org
- Crisis Center North 24/7/365 hotline: 412-364-5556 or 1-800-782-0911; Crisis Center North Text Line: 412-444-7660



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.