



Zzisa (Photo by Stacy Lutner Ritchey)

Puppy Power

Labs thrive in training at the Penn Vet Working Dog Center

by Jen Reeder



L to R: Packer, Pak, Parsons, Patterson, Pierce, Pinto, and Punches. (Photos by John Donges/Penn Vet)

O

n June 6, 2014, a sweet yellow Labrador retriever named Zzisa gave birth to a litter of nine puppies with a special destiny. Named for victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the "P" Litter –

Packer, Parsons, Pinto, Punches, Patterson, Pak, Philip, Pearl, and Pierce – would be trained for scent detection work by the Penn Vet Working Dog Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The Working Dog Center is the brainchild of Cindy Otto, DVM, PhD, DACVECC, DACVSMR, CCRT, who was deployed to Ground Zero in response to 9/11 as a veterinarian on a search and rescue task

The faces of some of the "P" litter are sweet but curious. (Photo by John Donges/Penn Vet)



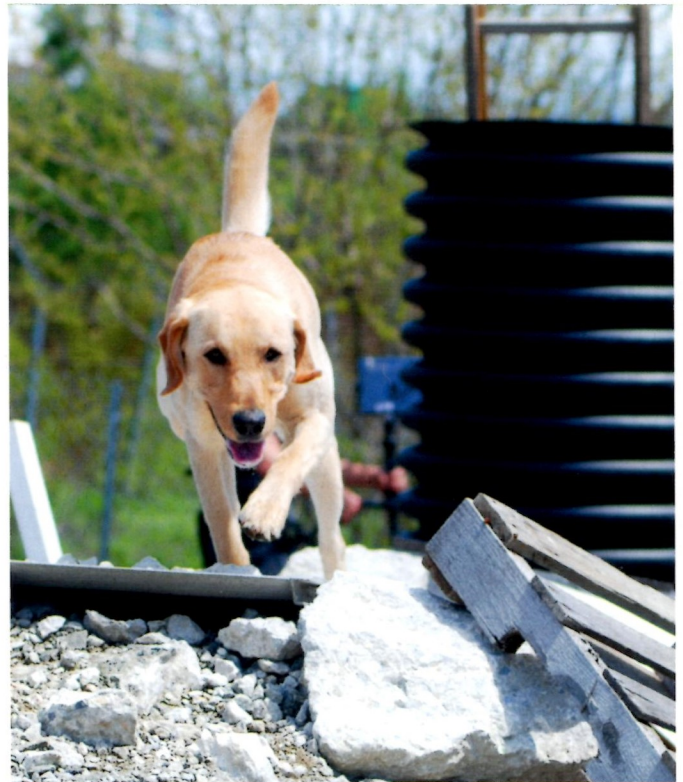
force. The “incredibly intense” experience treating disaster search dogs sparked her idea for a program that would use scientific research to support working dogs to do their jobs the “best way possible.”

“We opened our center on September 11, 2012,” said Otto, the executive director. “What it’s allowed us to do is kind of change the meaning of that day to more of a beacon of hope, as opposed to a sad memorial.”

At the center, dogs bred with strong hunt and toy drives are studied while they train to become effective, healthy working dogs. They live with foster families but train for eight hours a day at the center to get a foundation in basic obedience and scent detection. Though all dogs are taught to find live humans, they also can go on to “major” in other specialties: narcotics, explosives, human remains, firearms, low blood sugar in people with diabetes, and even ovarian cancer. They become highly skilled partners for first responders, police officers, and the occasional private citizen while the center analyzes factors that influence their health and performance.

“Our goal is to collect all the information that we can so we can continue to improve our program, whether it’s a training component, a health component, or a genetics component,” Otto said. “As a byproduct of that, our dogs get an incredible education and then are ready to move on.” She said the center’s research has shown a key to success is starting to train dogs when they are eight weeks old with positive reinforcement. “For these dogs, it’s so much fun,” Otto said. “They just learn this is all a game.”

So the program is a natural fit for fun-loving Labs. Annemarie DeAngelo, training director of the Penn Vet Working Dog Center, said dogs at the center essentially



Dogs at the Penn Vet Working Dog Center train daily on a rubble pile outside the center. (Photo by John Donges/Penn Vet)

choose their own careers – they specialize in the job they like best. While some Labs in the “P” Litter are “undeclared” or waiting for the right handler to come along, Packer and Parsons have already graduated into Search and Rescue work with handlers in Washington State and Michigan. Pinto works as a human remains detection dog in New York, and Punches is a diabetic alert dog who recently warned her handler when the woman’s blood sugar levels were dropping.

One of the members of the “P” litter in training. (Photo by John Donges/Penn Vet)





All dogs at the Penn Vet Working Dog Center learn to search for live humans and can also be trained for other scents, such as explosives or narcotics. (Photo by John Donges/Penn Vet)

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

If you're interested in supporting the Penn Vet Working Dog Center, there are a number of ways to help:

- Fostering a puppy
- Donating a puppy if you breed Labs with hunt and toy drive
- Volunteering on-site or remotely
- Becoming a handler for a dog from the center
- Attending an educational seminar or the Canine Handler Academy for Middle School Students
- Interning (high school or college students)
- Making a financial donation
- Liking the Penn Vet Working Dog Center on Facebook (PVWorkingDogCenter)



La Fond Davis and Packer are all smiles after becoming FEMA certified in disaster search on November 15, 2015, in Indianapolis. (Photo by Ellen Scheffler)

"Punches really had a strong connection with people," DeAngelo said. "They're all happy with their handlers and trainers, but she had a special connection."

When dogs start to show an affinity for a particular line of work, DeAngelo and her team train them how to alert when they find the odor they've been seeking. While Punches needs to paw at her handler when she detects a problem,

a dog who finds a bomb needs to sit "for obvious reasons"; and a Lab who finds a living person trapped in rubble needs to bark repeatedly and not leave until rewarded with his toy.

"Most of our scent detection is all toy-driven," DeAngelo explained. "It's all play. You should hear this place – we have a party. Everybody celebrates. If the dogs have fun, they're going to work harder."

Sean Mackey, a police officer with the University of Pennsylvania Police Department, was present at Zzisa's whelping and is now her handler in the K-9 unit. Zzisa is an accomplished explosives detection dog who, like her puppies, loves to work for the reward of a toy. She's also certified for article search.

"Article searches are when we're chasing a bad guy and he tossed something while he was running," Mackey said. "If he threw a knife or a set of keys or a stolen purse or wallet, Zzisa can search for articles that are out of the ordinary in any environment. She's very impressive."

In one instance, Mackey and Zzisa assisted the Philadelphia Police Department in response to a "shots fired" call outside their usual patrol zone. Officers had arrested the perpetrators but didn't find a gun. So Mackey led Zzisa to search the area and she found a firearm – the evidence needed to prosecute the criminals.

At home, Zzisa is a snuggler who is playful with Mackey's wife, children, and three other dogs. She even gets along with the family's cats. "But as soon as we get in the truck to go to work, it's like a switch – she knows she's going to work and to be more focused than when she's playing at home," Mackey said. "It's pretty cool to see."

The two work from 6 p.m. to 4 a.m. serving warrants, searching the campus for explosives before visits from dignitaries, and interacting with students on the University of Pennsylvania campus. Mackey said because Zzisa

and the department's other explosives detection dog are amiable Labs, students find their presence comforting instead of frightening.

Mackey recommends the Penn Vet Working Dog Center to other law enforcement officials as well as potential foster families. Before adopting Zzisa, he fostered a chocolate Lab named Papa Bear for the program; now Papa Bear is a narcotics detection dog in New Jersey.

"They put out a lot of good dogs with very good training," he said. Unsurprisingly, he thinks Zzisa has played a role. "She had nine great pups," Mackey said. "I think she's probably the best mother they could have had."

One of Zzisa's puppies, Packer, is a Search and Rescue dog who passed the challenging disaster search dog certification test of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in November 2015.

Packer's handler is La Fond Davis, search manager and canine search specialist for Washington Task Force 1 in Washington State. Davis is an experienced SAR handler who deployed with her first dog, a yellow Lab named Sunny, for 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and other disasters. "She taught me more than I ever taught her," Davis said.

"Now I have another yellow Lab very similar to Sunny – really high drive."

When Davis is home watching TV, Packer will nap with his head in her lap. But as soon as his toy comes out, he's a different dog – and when they arrive to train at a rubble site, he is completely focused on his work.

"Packer has the potential to be an awesome Search and Rescue dog. He's got play and toy drive like crazy. He's not really afraid of anything, but he's not going to hurt himself going over stuff," Davis said. "He loves the game and he's a strong boy."

She said Labs who work in SAR also provide stress relief for search teams and family members of missing people because they are typically friendly and people-oriented. In fact, she believes their affection for humans makes them ideal working dogs.

"The thing I've found about Labs is they really want to work with you. If they're bred to work, they want to please the handler and they want to do the job," Davis said. "So there's a relationship that develops with a Lab that is special. I don't think I'd ever really consider working with another dog."



For more information about the Penn Vet Working Dog Center, visit: <http://pennvetwdc.org>.

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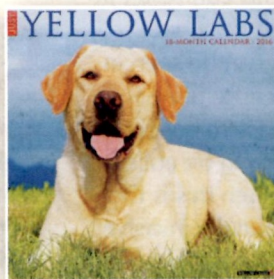
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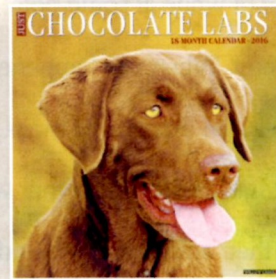
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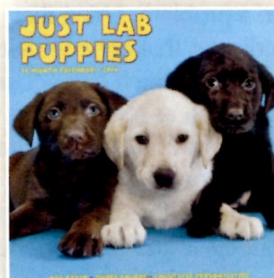
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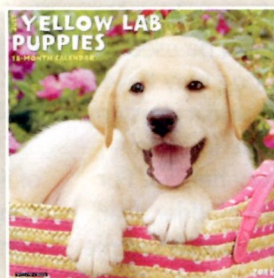
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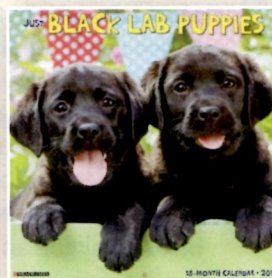
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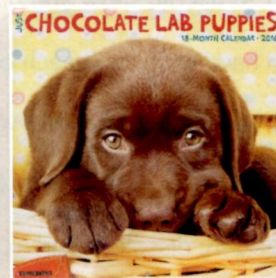
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