

In Their Debt

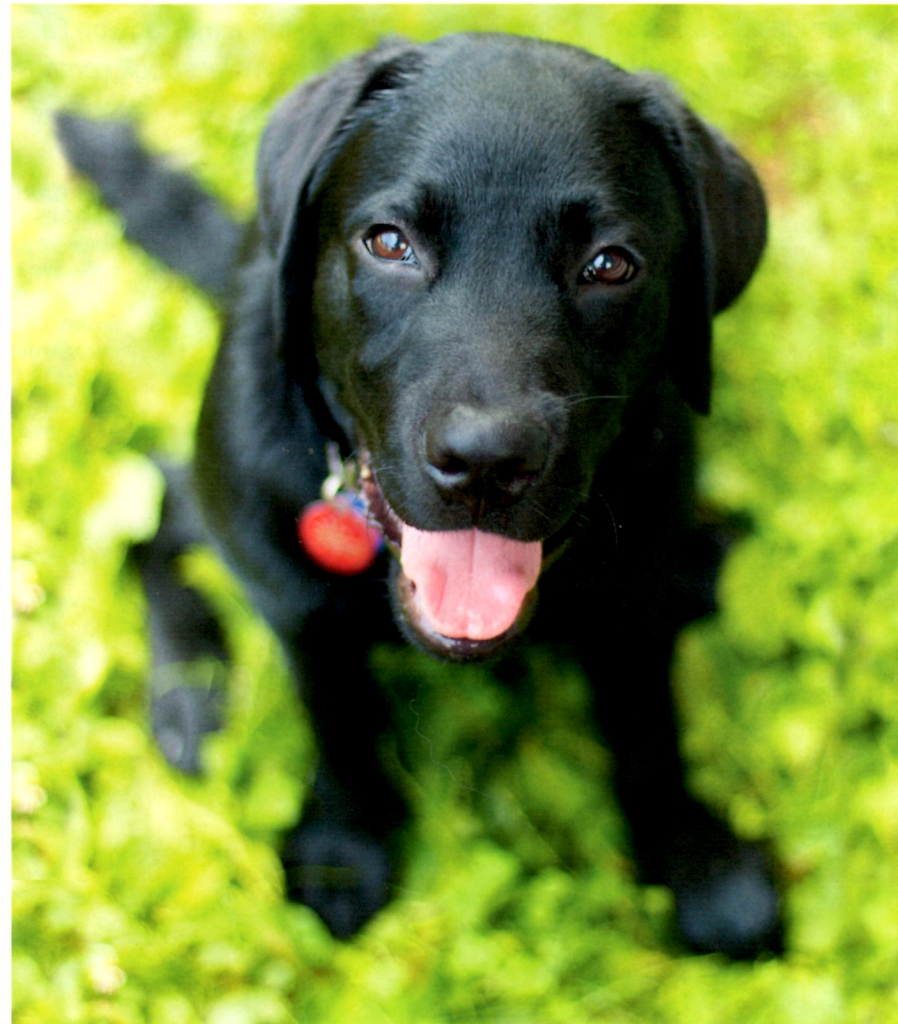
by Jen Reeder

Puppies with a Purpose

Teachers and students train psychiatric service dogs

Lab lovers know the special ways our dogs can touch our lives. But five Labrador retriever puppies are impacting lives in an entire community.

Photos by Kristen Alesevich



Harry, Jake, Taco, Belle, and Blue are the first group of Lab puppies training to be psychiatric service dogs by the nonprofit Exceptional Sidekick Service Dogs and Therapy Dogs in Newtown, Connecticut. The innovative program involves teacher and student trainers in three local schools: Newtown High School,



Abby Hill and Jake.

Reed Intermediate School, and Sandy Hook Elementary School.

“They started going into the school system in 2016 at about five months old,” said Abby Hill, the certified professional dog trainer who founded the nonprofit. “The teachers have been raising them. They go to classes, band competitions, hockey practices...they do everything. They are very socialized puppies.”

When ready, each Lab will receive specialized training as a psychiatric service dog for a civilian with conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or severe anxiety. They will be able to apply deep pressure during a panic attack or lead their handler away from an upsetting situation, among other skills.

But in the meantime, the Labs are helping spread awareness about service dogs and starting conversations about mental health issues – not to mention making people smile. In fact, they’re becoming local celebrities.

Harry

“We take the dogs into the community, and people are like, ‘Oh my gosh, is that one Harry? Is that one Jake?’ Everybody’s asking about them because the kids see them in school, and they know they can’t touch them, as service dogs in training, but they’re excited to see them anyway,” Hill said. “Everyone’s been very supportive.”

Hill is excited to be implementing a Teen Trainer Program through a partnership with Mental Health America. Teenage students will meet twice a week with a licensed family counselor to learn about common mental health issues, such as anorexia, depression, anxiety, stress, bipolar disorder, and addiction.

They’ll also take dog handling classes and “check out” the Labs during their free periods to walk them around school grounds.

“It’s amazing what having one of these dogs at the end of the leash does. People just open up to you. They start asking questions, and then that usually leads into a conversation about mental illness,” Hill said. “If we can give these teens the tools to support their peers through difficult times, then the amount of lives they could touch is just endless.”

Hill chose to train Labs for the program because the breed is associated with service dog work, and the friendly Lab demeanor is unlikely to cause confrontations

between the public and handlers. “They are goofy, happy Labs,” she said. “They’re non-threatening.”

Jennie Brown, a French teacher at Newtown High School, has volunteered as a puppy-raiser for over a year for Exceptional Sidekick Service Dogs and Therapy Dogs. She’s gotten to know three of the puppies because the dogs rotate between teachers every two months to avoid a teacher or family getting too attached, and to expose the Labs to different classrooms and homes. While they each have a distinct personality – Blue can be mischievous, Harry is mellow, Jake is the “big boy on the block”



Blue at Newtown High School.



Blue cuddles at Newtown High School.



Puppy-raiser Michelle with Taco.

– they share the common traits of intelligence, intuition, and eagerness to please. They also know when it’s time to work.

“It’s pretty remarkable to see the change that happens as soon as the service training vest is put on,” Brown said. “They really snap into service mode at that point.”

When the vest comes off back at home, they revert to typical puppy antics like stealing socks and playing in the yard with Brown’s pet dogs. (Georgina the cat puts the puppies in their place if they get too playful.) But they’re so well-behaved and unobtrusive in Brown’s classes and meetings that people often forget a dog is in the room.

“The biggest interruption the dog will do during my teaching day is to start snoring,” she said with a laugh. “They all snore pretty loudly.”

Brown and a colleague, who is also a puppy-raiser, introduced the Labs at an assembly at the start of the school year to explain the program and how to behave with service dogs. She said the response has been “gratifying.”

“Because it’s such a big school – all told there are about two thousand people in the building – I certainly don’t know every kid, by a long shot,” she said. “But when you walk down the hall with a dog, people are just really happy and smiling.... It’s been a big icebreaker in the school, a really

nice, sort of unifying force for us to have these dogs there.”

Her daughter, Sara El Moustakim, is an eighth grader who is enjoying learning how to train the puppies at home on obedience skills such as *come*, *heel*, and *drop it*. (Exceptional Sidekick uses only positive training methods, such as rewarding good behavior with play, praise, or a treat.) Though she said it will be sad when the pups graduate into their advanced service dog training, she knows it’s for a worthwhile cause: Each service dog will be given free of charge to a person with mental health challenges.

“They’re eventually going to go and do something – be helping someone else,” she said. “It just feels really good.”



For more information about Exceptional Sidekick Service Dogs and Therapy Dogs or to make a donation, please visit: www.newtownservicedogs.org.



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is an award-winning member of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and

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