

In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder



Labor of Love

Labs assist farmers with disabilities through P.H.A.R.M. Dog USA

Odie helping on the farm. (Photo by Jessica Stewart of the St. Joseph News-Press)

While the term “farm dog” might bring to mind images of herding breeds rounding up sheep, Labrador retrievers are now being trained for a very special purpose on farms: working as service dogs for farmers with disabilities.

“Farming is one of the more dangerous occupations,” said Jackie Allenbrand, a Missouri farmer. “Farmers are proud people, and they don’t always ask for support. But sometimes it’s okay to ask for that, and dogs can be helpful to them to stay active and independent on the farm.”

To help farmers in need, in 2012 Allenbrand founded the nonprofit P.H.A.R.M. Dog USA (Pets Helping Agriculture in Rural Missouri). The group rescues Labs and Lab mixes from shelters and trains them as service dogs for farmers coping with injuries or illnesses. (They also train border collies for herding tasks.)

The Labs’ retrieving instincts come in handy when training them for their job, which includes fetching tools and gloves as well as carrying buckets of chicken feed and opening farm gates.

“We do what we can to assist farmers with the help of what we refer to as a four-legged farmhand,” Allenbrand said. “We work on an individual basis to see what their needs are.”

One important job for her Labs is to assist farmers with mobility issues. The dogs wear harnesses with special bars that handlers can grab onto if they fall to the ground and need help getting up – the Labs are trained

to brace in those instances – or to hold for extra stability when walking around the property. “As we know, farm ground is sometimes uneven, and instead of using a cane or a walker, having a dog by your side with a harness on is helpful,” she explained.

A yellow Lab named Odie played a crucial role in helping get a farmer with a traumatic brain injury on the road to recovery. Allenbrand adopted Odie from a shelter in Ohio after the group heard about his situation and trained the 18-month-old pup to assist the farmer, who hadn’t left his house in about four years due to depression following his injury and difficulty with dizzy spells. After a few years with Odie working as his service dog, the farmer’s posture and ability to walk independently improved so much that he no longer needed assistance.

“He called me up and said, ‘Do you know what? I’m getting along better. I

feel like I'm not using Odie as much as what he was trained for. I'd like to donate him back to the program because I think he would be useful to you."

Odie has been very useful in his latest role as the ambassador dog for P.H.A.R.M. Dog USA. Allenbrand and her husband permanently adopted him; he loves to play on their farm with their black Lab, Izzy. Allenbrand said Odie's demonstrations at schools and farm shows such as Husker Harvest Days in Nebraska help spread awareness not just about the nonprofit but of farm dog skills and how to behave around service dogs, such as not petting or feeding them.

"Odie has a wonderful, loving temperament – he doesn't know a stranger," Allenbrand said. "All the kids love him, all the adults love him. He's just a big teddy bear. He's a great ambassador for our program."

P.H.A.R.M. Dog USA is a labor of love – no one draws a salary. Several trainers volunteer their time to raise and train the border collies for herding, and the Labs are mostly trained by Allenbrand.

She recently started partnering with the Missouri Department of Corrections' Puppies for Parole program, in which prison inmates train rescued dogs for adoption, to identify candidates and train them to be registered AKC Canine Good Citizens.

Allenbrand said her group has placed more than 15 dogs with farmers



Jackie Allenbrand and Odie.

in the Midwest so far, and she hopes to expand because of rising interest from farmers in her region and beyond. One goal is to open a training center next year because with an indoor facility, her team could train dogs year-round instead of having to put things on hold during snow and rain. It's a lot to do on top of everyday farm chores.

"Sometimes we say we're either dumb or determined, but we choose the word determined," she said with a laugh. "We know what it's like to be on a farm – there's always a tractor to be fixed or

a fence to be mended. Some of the farmers have said that they might have had to give up farming if they didn't have a dog to assist them, or that the dogs help them not only physically but emotionally as well. When you go through an injury or an illness, you deal with some depression, and the dog gets you up and out. So they're multipurpose dogs."

Sandy Rickey, a dog trainer and farmer in Odessa, Missouri, offered Allenbrand training tips when she was starting P.H.A.R.M. Dog USA and still consults periodically. Rickey grew up on a farm and has lived on her current property for around 35 years, so she knows from experience how valuable farm dogs can be. "I'm by myself on the farm, and I could not run the place without my dogs," she said. "This is one reason I am so pleased that someone is doing this program – because a lot of people don't realize how handy a dog can be."

Rickey's dogs help in herding livestock and with predator control, and pick up anything she or a guest drops without being told (one found her brother's Social Security card when it fell out of his wallet). She has a hearing problem, and one dog, Barb Wire Abe, will come get her if there's any noise she should be aware





Odie in his harness.


of, such as a car pulling into her driveway or the microwave beeping. She's grateful for all they do for her.

"If I need a gate blocked, I can leave a dog standing at that gate, and it'll keep the cattle from going through while I'm over in another area," she said. "At night, if a ewe starts to lamb or something, one of the outside dogs will raise a ruckus

to the point that I go see what's wrong. It doesn't necessarily mean the ewe needs help, but she might. Anything that's unusual around the

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place, a dog will usually notice and let you know."

Rickey said she supports the work of P.H.A.R.M. Dog USA because it enables farmers facing challenges to continue with their way of life. "I think it's one of the best programs that's come along – not only for disabled people, but just to let people know how much help a dog can be." 



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

her husband adopted a loveable Lab mix named Rio. Please share tips for future columns about Labs and working dog organizations that help make our world a better place at: jen@jenreeder.com.



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