

Hillsboro, North Plains women volunteer as puppy trainers for Autism Service Dogs of America

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By **Kathy Fuller, The Hillsboro Argus**

Jan Upton and Mary Shimel look forward a few times a year to a new puppy coming to live at their homes -- blank slates, so to speak, ready to learn.



Michal Thompson, The Hillsboro Argus

Mary Shimel (left) of North Plains and Jan Upton of Hillsboro train autism dogs starting as young as Koda, 12-weeks and Karma, 10-weeks. Jet, an English lab, is already an old hand at 7 1/2 months.

Upton, 55, of Hillsboro and Shimel, 56, of North Plains are volunteer puppy raiser coaches for **Autism Service Dogs of America**, a Lake Oswego-based nonprofit that trains dogs that will ultimately be placed with families of children with autism.

Both women got involved in the organization in 2005, Shimel when her son asked to raise a puppy for ASDA and Upton, well, just because she enjoys dogs.

Upton is also active in **Search ONE K9 Detection**, an urban and wilderness search and rescue group.

Autism service dogs are trained beginning at 8 to 10 weeks of age. Upton and Shimel get the puppies and will spend 6 to 8 weeks putting the dogs through basic training -- much of the same training that happens with any puppy new to a family.

"It's important the dogs get comfortable with being handled," said Laurel Oliver-Gilmore, program administrator with ASDA. Autistic children may interact with dogs differently, she said, including leaning on the dog and pulling on ears, tails, fur and feet.

Shimel and Upton also work to socialize the puppies, exposing them to many different environments and interactions. The women will discover a puppy's fears, such as metal grates in the sidewalk or shopping carts, and begin helping dogs get over any fears.

"It's like having an infant," Shimel said.

Crate training and walking on leash are also on the puppies' docket, as well as learning to understand that they are "working" when wearing their green packs identifying them with ASDA dogs.

Once Upton and Shimel are done, the puppies' training is just getting started.

The average training time is two years, Oliver-Gilmore said.

Both Shimel and Upton said they sit down and write pages of information on each puppy before turning the dog over to the next volunteer puppy trainers. Those volunteer trainers will spend 15 to 18 months training the dog under ASDA supervision.

"With each puppy it's like a puzzle," Upton said recently, while constantly reminding her most recent charges, Koda and Karma, about proper manners. The puppies get plenty of time to be puppies, splashing in a kiddie pool one hot afternoon.

Having initial insight about a puppy's personality and quirks, Upton said, helps the next raisers get to know the puppy faster.

ASDA, founded in 2002, has placed 35 dogs so far and currently has 21 dogs in training. About 30 volunteers are the core of the thousands of hours that go into training each dog, Oliver-Gilmore said. "Volunteers are the heart and soul of the organization."

The waiting list for families to receive a dog is about a year and a half.

An autism service dog is often tethered to the child, helping keep the child safe in public. A child's anxiety can be reduced at home, school and in the community by having the dog near.

"Autism can be isolating for an entire family," Oliver-Gilmore said. A service dog can open up the world for not only the autistic child, but for the family as well.

One family, Oliver-Gilmore said, summed up for her why ASDA provides an important service. The family said their son was "like a puzzle. The dog stabilized a piece of that puzzle."

ASDA insists on intensive training for its dogs and also for its families.

The organization has one employee, a placement specialist who works with families and also does the final training with dogs.

Before being placed with a family, the dog must pass ongoing temperament testing. The dogs must earn an "exemplary" rating according to the standards of **Assistance Dogs International**. All dogs "meet the standards and assessment requirements of our industry and ASDA has strict evaluation criteria that each dog is required to meet," Oliver-Gilmore said.

Once a dog is ready for placement, a parent from the family comes to Oregon to train with the dog for five days, Oliver-Gilmore said. The parent then takes the dog home to live with the family and begin the adjustment period.

Finally, the placement specialist goes to the family's home for more training. During that time, families get in-home training for all family members. If the child will take the dog to school, ASDA's placement specialist spends time at the school in the child's classroom and training school staff.

It costs an average of \$19,000 to raise and train a dog, Oliver-Gilmore said, including veterinary care, training and equipment costs, and food.

Families that receive trained dogs are asked to raise \$13,500. Autism Service Dogs of America relies on donations to pay for the rest.

"I love the dogs. They do come and go," Upton said.

But what she enjoys the most is the connections with other volunteers.

"I like hearing the stories, hearing the huge differences they (the service dogs) make in lives." Upton said.

"It's bittersweet," parting with the pups after their training, Shimel said. "We get the puppies knowing they have a higher calling."

-- Kathy Fuller
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