

Therapy Dogs Are **Born**

By Juanita Fagan



My mom wakes me up at my usual time. I stretch as I get out of bed, go outside and do my business. Back in the house I eat my breakfast. Then mom starts the bath and the grooming, and I know what day it is. Mom carefully gets out my scarf, puts on my collar with my ID badges, and we head to the door. I am going to work! I am so excited it is hard to keep it together as I jump and spin! I am the "Great Bitch Heidi;" aka, Champion Heartwood's Just Sooo Hot, and I am a Therapy Dog

Nothing is more inspiring than to watch our noble breed work. When I retired from 30 years as an educator, I wanted to give back to my community through volunteer work, and I wanted to do it with my dogs. I have been breeding and showing Dobermans for over 20 years, and our dogs are my passion. So there was no question which direction I would go on my quest for finding volunteer work that meant something to me.

In the spring of 2007 I began my training for Therapy Dog work at the Department of Veterans Affairs Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center and Clinics in White City. Sandy Bailey was an evaluator with Therapy Dogs International, and every Wednesday at noon she would meet potential handlers with their dogs to observe and guide us as we talked to the patients and encouraged interaction with our dogs. There were also a few certified teams that just loved working with the veterans and were committed to the Wednesday sessions.

My champion bitch Heidi needed a job, so this was the perfect solution. Heidi had already earned her AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC), and I knew that the Therapy Dog International (TDI) evaluation included all CGC items plus some medical items that I needed to expose Heidi to, ie; the sound of a bedpan hitting the floor, navigating around a wheelchair, walker, and crutches, as well as tolerating sounds of infirm patients. Heidi passed the test easily, and the next step was filling out the application form and completing her required health test. TDI requires all potential Therapy Dogs to be current on their shots, a negative heartworm test, and a negative giardia test. The vet must sign off that the potential Therapy Dog is in good health.

Mom parks the car at Bellview Elementary School in Ashland, Oregon, where I work as a Reading Dog. This was her school, and now it is mine. I have worked here for many years and have helped over thirty students. I work with the challenging ones...kids who are smart and can read but have had bad experiences in their life and have difficulty behaving. In the last 6 years I have loved the kids that are tough to love. I look deep in their eyes, and I know they have many secrets that I can feel. They touch my head, and I know they feel safe and loved with me. They know I



Heidi with her reading student.

would never hurt them. I feel their pain slowly shift every time they sit close to me and touch me. They know they can always trust me.

There are several Therapy Dog groups that provide information about Therapy Dogs and how to become certified. If you live in an urban area, you probably have a choice of which organization to work with. If you live in a rural area, you are usually limited to the organization that your nearest evaluator works with. If you do a little research on the Internet, you can quickly narrow down the organization what will work for you by searching for an evaluator. Since the evaluation includes CGC items, most evaluators are also certified with AKC

to conduct a CGC test in conjunction with the Therapy Dog evaluation. The following organizations are the most frequently researched:

- Therapy Dogs International, www.tdi-dog.org
- Delta Society, www.petpartners.org
- Therapy Dog, Inc, www.therapydogs.com
- Therapy Dogs United, www.therapydogsunited.org

A certified Therapy Dog can now earn a title with the American Kennel Club after they have completed their first 50 visits as a Therapy Dog. More information can be found at www.akc.org/akctherapydog.

I love being a Reading Dog. I am so excited to see my kids every week. After my mom signs in at the office, we walk down the hall to 2nd Grade where my first student is. This boy was too wild for one of the other Therapy Dogs, and they asked my mom if I could work with him because I am so calm, and my mom has experience with kids like this. Our first time with him he was out of control, as we walked down the hallway to the library. My mom stopped which was my signal to sit. My mom quietly said, "Heidi is an old girl, and she can't handle loud noises or wild movement. If you want to work with Heidi, you need to be calm." That's all she ever had to say, and he has been perfect every time we visit. He told my mom that I can look into his soul and that he and I are connected. He wears brown on the day I come to work with him so we can match. He has a tender heart, and I have made a difference for him.

As you review the research on TherapyDogs you will find a common belief: Therapy Dogs are born. They are

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not made. People who understand dog behavior know that over time you can gradually change a dog's behavior, positive or negative. Shaping and molding behavior is what we do with our dogs whether we are training them for obedience in the performance ring or as a good citizen that shares our home and our lives. A Therapy Dog must consistently display an outstanding temperament. A Therapy Dog must be friendly with people and other dogs, enjoy a variety of activities, be tolerant of unusual situations, be calm and consistently convey confidence, enjoy being touched and being physically close with people, and most important follow their handler's directions.

I receive many calls from people inquiring about the Therapy Dog evaluation. They all start with..."my dog loves people and loves to be petted." That's just one piece of therapy work. Being calm and staying put for long periods of time is critical. I believe that the best Therapy Dogs are ones that have a deep sense of compassion and empathy for people that are in physical pain as well as emotional pain. These dogs have the sensitivity to detect when someone is hurting. They stay focused on the individual needing them. A true Therapy Dog can zero in on who is in need of their attention, it's like a special "homing device" for a person needing comfort.

After working with my three students, we drive to the hospital where I am needed for patients recovering from trauma. My mom puts on my special scarf and tag that says, "Pet Therapy". We go up the elevator to what she calls the 6th floor. Everyone is happy to see me. While my mom signs in and reads the patient roster, the therapist and nurses gather around and welcome me. Everyone has to put stinky stuff on their hands before they pet me and after. This is because we have to be very careful not to spread germs. The therapist tells my mom about a young man

who needs me. The therapist walks us to his room. There are machines making quiet noises. The man is laying inside a cage that looks like the soft crates my mom has but it is on the bed. There are two people who are sitting close to the bed and talking in soft voices. The therapist says, "This is Heidi the dog I told you about." Then she sits on a chair right next to the bed. I go up to the man, and we look at each other. The bed is low to the ground so I can see him. I can see so much pain and confusion in his eyes. He tries to talk and it is hard. So many wires in his arms. The therapist opens the crate door on the side of his bed and asks him if he would like to pet me. He mumbles something that I think is "Yes." The therapist asks me to get up on the bed with him. I move slowly and end up lying next to him. The therapist lifts his hand that's in a brace to the top of my head and the young man looks deep into my eyes and we connect. I can see he has so much pain. Time passes, I am very still and then he lifts a finger by himself as a way to pet me. The therapist has watery eyes and everyone is so happy. This is the first time he has moved on his own.

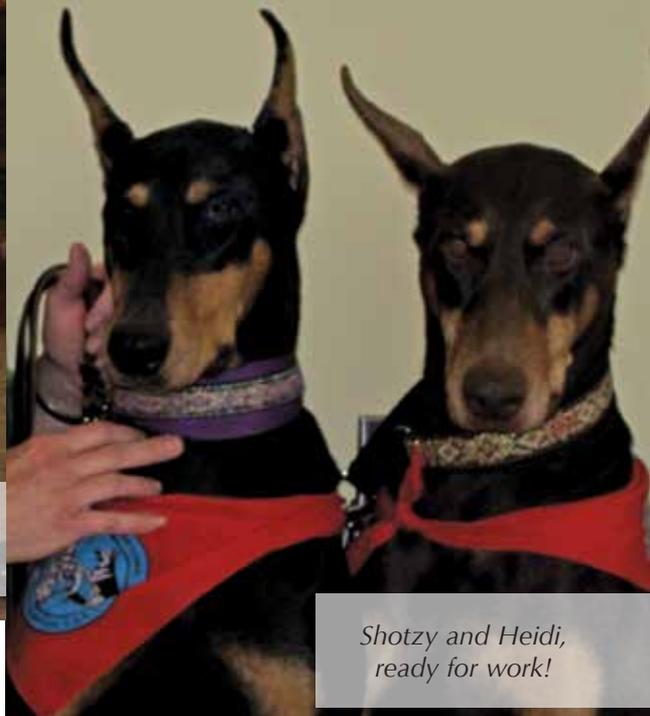
We continue to look at each other and I know he loves me.

Once a dog has passed the Therapy Dog evaluation, the owner sends in the application. Within a few weeks a packet arrives with a welcome letter, information regarding Therapy Dogs and an identification tag for the dog to wear. Each Therapy Dog organization has their own requirements for conducting a visit, insurance policy to cover you while you are on a visit, and instructions on how to document your visits. The next step is up to you. There are so many opportunities for venues to visit. An easy first step is a retirement center or assisted living. These places always want Therapy Dog visits and the residents love having the dogs visit. Some centers offer a "pet therapy" time once a week. Others





Van at the VA Hospital.



Shotzy and Heidi, ready for work!

have a recreational assistant who will know who would like a visit. Hospitals are warming to the idea that Therapy Dogs can provide a valuable benefit to patients and promote healing.

Some communities have a Therapy Dog group that support each other and provide a line of communication between the members. Communication is critical for the cohesiveness of the group and to notify the teams of a specific need in the community. Periodically, meetings will provide additional training and an opportunity to improve on the services the volunteers provide.

Therapy Dog work is not for everyone. It takes a very special team to work with hospice patients, patients in an Alzheimer unit, a lock down mental health ward, or with a correctional facility. These venues require a dog and handler to be flexible, ready to adapt to challenging situations, and empathy for the individual needs. In these venues you come upon the most challenged and most needy. Confidentiality is a must.

We visit a few more patients. Some cry when they pet me because they miss their dog or I remind them of a dog they had when they were a kid. Sometimes they ask what kind of dog I am. My mom proudly says I am a red Doberman and they are always surprised...I don't understand that! I am a comfort for the families. They are afraid their loved one will not recover. The nurses and therapists always say "thank you" when we get ready to leave. I get a lot of hugs!

Usually evaluators will schedule an evaluation 4 to 6 times a year depending on the interest in their area. Often these scheduled evaluations coincide with AKC events or other planned canine activities in the community. As an evaluator, I like using one of our local assisted living centers where I can engage the residents in the actual test utilizing their wheelchairs and walkers. Once you find an evaluator in your area and register for an upcoming test it is helpful if you practice some of the test items several times before the scheduled date. The Therapy Dog organization will list test requirements on their website. I also encourage potential

teams to go visit a retirement center that has a scheduled "pet day" to see how their dog reacts to other dogs in this venue. This will also give them insight as to whether this volunteer opportunity is really a fit for them. Aside from the actual test items most Therapy Dog evaluators will require that your dog be tested on a flat buckle or snap collar (some allow halters but no choke chains or pinch collars) and a 6-foot leash. The evaluator may ask that you bring your dog's brush for the grooming item on the test. You will also be asked to bring proof of rabies vaccination and your county's required dog license. The cost of the evaluation depends on the organization you are working with.

We walk to the parking lot to our car. My mom opens my crate and I jump in. She removes my scarf and my badges, scratches my head, gives me a cookie and says, "Good girl." We are on our way home. On the drive I start to fall asleep. I am so tired and ready for naptime on my bed. I have done my work. My heart is full. I am the "Great Bitch Heidi," and I am a Therapy Dog!

The Doberman Pinscher is a breed that is ready to work. A true companion dog, our breed lends itself to the qualities of a Therapy Dog. Though this work is very rewarding, it is not for the faint of heart. You work with people who are in pain, are confused, feel afraid, feel sad and uncertain about tomorrow. There are times that you quietly observe the interaction between your dog and the person that is touching her. Sometimes the silence is hard to bear, but you are patient and you know that there is no other place you'd rather be than where you are at this time with your Therapy Dog. These are the people, young and old, who need what a Therapy Dog offers...unconditional love.

Juanita Fagan has been breeding Dobermans for over 20 years as Heartwood Dobermans. And is an AKC Breeder of Merit, TDI and CGC Evaluator