

# Program rescues dogs, helps disabled



By

Joni Andrews / Times staff Brandi Arnold watches as Naomi Hardsty of Peoria takes a remote from Sasha, a standard poodle, during a retrieval exercise at a training session for Paws Giving Independence, a group at Bradley University that rescues shelter dogs to be used as service animals.

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By Valari Hyatt  
Pekin Daily Times  
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PEORIA, Ill. -

When the right dog ends up in a shelter, it can mean independence for someone with a disability, said Michelle Kosner, co-founder and director of Paws Giving Independence.

The nonprofit group — founded by Bradley students Kosner, Brandi Arnold and Eric Swanson — rescues dogs from shelters and trains them to be service animals for people with disabilities.

“A big part of what we do is find people who could benefit from having a service dog, promote animal rescue and find new foster homes,” said Kosner, a senior health science student who will graduate in May before entering Bradley’s graduate program in physical therapy.

All of the dogs in the program are rescued from animal shelters, and eight dogs have been rescued since last summer, some coming from as far away as Fulton County and Quincy.

One of the organization’s star pupils, Wrigley, came from the Tazewell Animal Protective Society. The 1-year-old golden Australian shepherd mix was adopted in January and is training to help someone in a wheelchair.

“Wrigley has learned a lot in a few months and is learning to open doors, turn on lights and pick up dropped items,” Kosner said. “He is a sweetheart and loves to cuddle. His foster mom loves him, and he actually took his first trip into Target last week. He is just starting his public training now. He should be placed in August, since the dogs normally train for six months to one year.”

During the program, the dogs attend weekly training sessions on Bradley’s campus, Kosner said, and they receive further practice at their foster homes, where they live with Peoria community leaders.

“It’s a win-win situation,” she said. “We take dogs that other people have given up on and we train them to help someone. The dogs become prime examples of the high quality of pets that can be adopted from an animal shelter in the greater Peoria area.”

“Many people may not realize what a shelter dog is capable of,” said Arnold, a junior nursing student at Bradley, “but we are going to show them.”

Arnold and Kosner spent two years volunteering at a similar organization near Chicago, and they knew there was a need for the same services in the Peoria area.

Kosner recalled one success story that exemplifies the whole program: “Last spring Riley, a dog in training, went to classes and enjoyed life as a Bradley student. Riley has been placed with a 24-year-old college student with cerebral palsy.

“He said that Riley has changed his life and has given him independence. He called one day to tell (us) he had taken the train to downtown Chicago with (Riley). (We) thought he was happy that Riley did well on the trip, but then he explained his excitement was over the fact that he had never taken the train alone. With Riley by his side, he had the courage to try it on his own. He now takes the train downtown every day for an internship.”

Dogs deemed acceptable for the program go through extensive temperament testing before being placed with foster families, which keep the animals for six months to a year.

“It’s a great family project,” Kosner said, noting that three Bradley professors are service dog foster parents. “Every Monday night the families and their dogs come to the Markin Center for dog training.”

Dogs learn how to open doors, turn on lights, pick up dropped items, pull a wheelchair, brace for a transfer, take off a jacket and perform other tasks specially designed for their handlers.

Some organizations charge between \$10,000 and \$15,000 per dog, Kosner said, but PGI place dogs for free.

“These dogs bridge the gap between those with disabilities and the non-disabled population,” said Kosner. “(One woman in the program) said that people would first see her wheelchair, now they see her dog. She said that people are always stopping to ask questions about her dog. No one ever talked to her before, and now she has met more people.”

Currently, there are six dogs in the program, all of which will be placed this summer. The organization has previously been self-financed but is now collecting donations in order to place the dogs free of charge.

"We're really encouraged by all of the support from Bradley University and the community," Kosner said.

Swanson, a senior business management student, agreed, and encouraged people to ask questions and get involved.

"We are currently looking for children and adults who could benefit from having a service dog," he said.

### **Paws Giving Independence**

**Mission:** The objective of PGI is to train service dogs to assist people with a variety of disabilities while providing support and encouraging independence. PGI educates the public about the benefits of service dogs and encourages animal rescue by obtaining many animals from shelters and rescue groups.

**Vision:** To provide quality service dogs free of charge to adults and children; to provide exceptional canine health and overall well-being for dogs; to create the highest quality match between dog and handler; to develop a long-term relationship with alumni, other organizations and the community; and to educate the public about service dogs through demonstrations.

**Tasks:** PGI service dogs can open and close doors, turn lights on and off, assist with dressing, carry items, pick up items, brace for transfers, get a telephone, pull a wheelchair, provide independence and support, and perform other commands specifically designed for handler.

**Who benefits:** Service dogs can help people with such disorders as spinal cord injury, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, developmental delays, cerebral palsy, balance problems and more.

For more information, write to Paws Giving Independence at "Saving a Life to Change a Life," P.O. Box 9572, Peoria, IL, 61612-9572.

To learn more about the independence program, apply for a service dog or donate, visit [givingindependence.org](http://givingindependence.org).

**Source:** Paws Giving Independence

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