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life, people & pets

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Calgarian Alison Archambault is helping prepare Tonka, a golden retriever puppy, for his life as a service dog for a child with autism.

HEROES IN TRAINING

Service dogs changing lives for autistic kids and their families

GARRIE KELLY
WAG

A golden retriever puppy tends to attract attention at any time, and that increases when one is wearing a purple puppy-in-training cape.

Tonka, an eight-month-old golden retriever, is being raised and socialized by a Calgary family to help ready him for a pairing with an autistic child.

He'll stay with his foster family for 16 months before returning to the National Service Dogs centre in Ontario for advanced training.

Allison Archambault received Tonka in January and is helping prepare him for his life as a service dog.

Her family is on board as well, believing this is one way they can make a difference for autistic children.

"Our first service dog was Kimba," says Archambault. "I gave Kimba over in early afternoon and was paired with Tonka that evening."

She takes him into grocery stores, on the C-Train and to the

library so he is used to being out in public, as he will accompany the child he is partnered with everywhere.

"Tonka's desire to please is very high. He works really hard," she says. "When we go out in public, there is a lot of interest in him."

She enlists help from emergency services personnel to allow him to walk around an ambulance with its lights flashing and takes him to the mall on a busy day so that noise and high activity levels will not be a distraction for him.

Tonka has already flown on an airplane three times.

It wasn't easy for Archambault to part with Kimba, the first dog she raised, and she knows it won't be easy to let Tonka go when the time comes.

But the tears she shed when parting with Kimba were temporary.

"National Service Dogs supplies me with lots of updates on how she is doing. And when you realize how big the waiting list is for the dogs, you want to do it," she says.

There is a three-year waiting list

to receive a dog.

The wait is long because it takes two years to train a dog, there are a limited number of trainers, the process is expensive and some dogs may ultimately not be suited to service work.

Each dog costs about \$30,000, paid for mainly by donations. National Service Dogs (NSD) is a non-profit charitable organization and families who receive a dog are encouraged to help with fundraising.

Children paired with a dog must be under age 12, primarily because the children need to be small enough for the dog to hold if they try to bolt.

The dogs are usually tethered to the child.

Calgarian Michelle McIntyre knows first-hand how life changing it can be to receive a service dog. Her son Rowan, now 12, was paired with Whitby, a black lab, in November 2008.

Rowan has Down syndrome and Pervasive Development Disorder, part of the autism spectrum. They applied to NSD when Rowan was eight.

Once they were matched with Whitby, McIntyre received five days of intense training with her. McIntyre believes Whitby has increased Rowan's confidence.

"She is a wonderful ambassador and therapist for him," she says.

Rowan has taken responsibility for the dog, feeding and grooming her and even reading out loud to her.

Whitby has proven to have a calming effect on Rowan. Before, McIntyre tried to avoid grocery shopping with him, but now the dog gives him a focal point.

"At doctor appointments, if we are waiting, Rowan will just sit there and play with the dog. He's less likely to get into trouble."

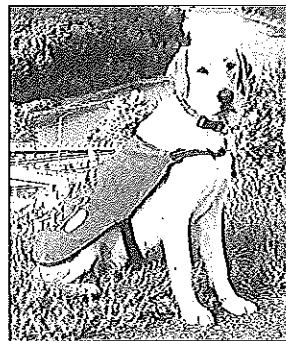
The McIntyres are currently waiting for permission for Rowan to take Whitby to school with him.

Next year he will go to a new school for junior high and his family believes Whitby can ease the transition.

Whitby is one of 180 dogs NSD has placed across Canada, says Danielle Forbes, National Service Dogs' executive director.



Rowan McIntyre has a close bond with his service dog Whitby. The black lab was provided through National Service Dogs.



Kimba, sporting a puppy-in-training cape, was socialized and trained by Calgarian Alison Archambault. She is now training Tonka to be a National Service Dog to eventually be partnered with an autistic child. The goal is to enrich the quality of life and enhance the independence of children and families living with autism and special needs.