

“Changing Lives”

Hi - Tech Beauty: Texas Hearing and Service Dogs



Courage, Service Dog - Male black lab, adopted from Houston SPCA

In 1988, Sheri Soltes, President and Founder of Texas Hearing and Service Dogs (THSD), was a trial lawyer working in Houston. One day, Sheri happened upon a magazine article about a non-profit organization that had been taking dogs out of shelters and training them as assistance dogs, referring to guide dogs, hearing dogs, and service dogs.

The article spoke of the challenges and isolation faced by people with disabilities and how these specially trained dogs allowed them to lead more independent and fulfilling lives. It was then that Sheri made a decision that would change her life and the lives of countless others forever.

After reading the article, Sheri reflected back on her childhood and felt she could relate to the people she read about. “As a child, I moved around a lot, and one of the worst feelings is being the new kid in school and going in to the lunch room and wondering where you’re going to sit,” says Sheri.

“Then you go home at the end of the day and there is your pet waiting for you and suddenly you don’t feel lonely anymore.” Being able to relate to the isolation those with physical limitations may feel, Sheri clearly understood the important role dogs play in people’s lives and decided to make a life change by helping people



and the animals she loved.

Assistance dogs are not therapy dogs, but instead are highly trained dogs that are partnered for life with one person and provide daily physical and emotional assistance to that person. Sheri tells us, “Service dogs put back the pieces of the puzzle their disability took away.”

In Texas and throughout the U.S., assistance dogs are allowed in any public building that provides any

type of customer service, whether that be a restaurant, a doctor's office, shopping mall or movie theater. When these dogs are out with their person, they are working. So in order to show respect for the person and not distract the dog from their training or work, we should always ask, "May I pet your dog?" before touching or speaking to the dog.

Sheri and her staff of trainers have provided service hearing dogs and service dogs throughout Texas. They place dogs with people who are deaf or struggle daily with mobility issues as a result of accidents, strokes or illnesses such as Parkinson's Disease. They also provide assistance dogs to those who have served in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars and have experienced a hearing loss or loss of mobility.

To clarify, hearing dogs alert their deaf partners to essential everyday sounds by touching them and leading them to the source of the sounds such as a door knock, telephone ring, baby's cry or oven timer. Service dogs assist individuals by opening doors, retrieving items, turning lights on and off, moving paralyzed limbs and getting help when needed.

Sheri, pictured on this page, refers to assistance dogs as "technology you can hug." All of these skills are extremely important to the independence of the owners, but the dogs also contribute to the owners' emotional well-being by providing daily companionship and encouragement.

So where do these highly skilled dogs come from? Each dog that THSD accepts into their training program comes from a shelter or rescue group throughout Texas. THSD normally has

10-15 dogs in their training program at any given time. They assess each dog for overall temperament, trainability and health status.

Even dogs that have treatable health diseases like heartworms are not denied being a service dog as long as they initially meet the working ability criteria for service. Service dogs can be of any size or breed ranging from Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds, Border Collies and any mixed breed dog. The important thing is that they can do the job.

Once a dog passes his evaluation and is deemed healthy, his training begins. He will spend six to eight weeks training at the THSD facility in Dripping Springs, Texas, learning basic commands, specialized skills and indoor manners.

Only positive training methods are used – the goal is for the dog to want to work because he has a good relationship with the trainer based on trust and mutual respect, not out of fear of being punished. It takes nine to 12 months for a dog to become service ready and all but the initial basic training takes place in the client's home.

Dogs that provide the level of service needed to be a service dog are not easy to find, but with THSD's highly skilled staff, most dogs chosen for their programs are extremely successful. Very few do not make it through the program, but Sheri explains, "Sometimes we find that a dog is better suited to be a companion dog. We call these dogs 'Career Change Dogs' and they are placed for adoption



or returned to the rescue where they came from for placement in their adoption program." (THSD will never return a dog to a shelter that euthanizes due to intake numbers.)

Clients do not pay for their assistance dogs and funds are raised through donations, grants, and fundraisers like the Texas Hearing and Service Dogs' annual Mighty Texas Dog Walk, which takes place this year on April 17th on the Austin's First Street bridge.

Even though it costs THSD about \$18,000 to train each dog, potential clients only pay a small \$25 application fee. The organization makes certain that the person can afford the normal upkeep for the Hearing or Service Dog once it moves into their home.

In addition to assisting with its human owner's day-to-day challenges, an assistance dog needs to be prepared for emergencies.

Sheri shares one memorable story: Maribel Schumann, a stroke survivor in her 70s, decided to take advantage of a beautiful Texas day and go sit outside and enjoy the day. With the help of her service dog, Honor, Maribel worked her way to one of her favorite spots, her porch swing. One minute she was enjoying the cool breeze and sunshine, but the next, she awoke to Honor, who was covered in blood, licking her face profusely.

At first Maribel was devastated, thinking that Honor had been somehow injured. But she soon realized that the swing had given way and she was the one lying on the ground injured – and it was her blood that Honor was covered in.

Bracing herself on Honor, Maribel was able to get up and work her way back into her wheelchair and into the house. She cued Honor to press the large medical alarm button that connected to the local EMS. Maribel was unable to speak and tell them she needed help.

Using her highly trained skills, Honor was aware of everything happening and took matters into her own "paws". She began barking loudly into the phone until help arrived.

In June of 2000 Honor was named Hero Dog of the Year by Dog Fancy Magazine. When asked how this award made her feel, Sheri Soltes said, "The award was great, but what was more important was that we rescued a dog that was three days away from euthanasia and she, in turn, saved her partner's life. What it meant to me is, one more dog was rescued, two lives were changed, and Honor did her job and saved her partner's life."

One of the programs that THSD has begun - and that Sheri is passionate about - is the Child Advocacy Dog Program. The idea came about when Sheri attended the annual Assistance Dogs International conference. A group from Seattle gave a presentation about how assistance dogs were being used to provide emotional support within the criminal justice system, especially to children being interviewed about abuse or violence.

Sheri knew there would be challenges due to the way most of the child advocacy centers in Texas are located separately from the courthouses - unlike Seattle, where the children are interviewed in the same building where they eventually attend court.

Sheri explains, "Once I learned more about this program and how much it was helping victims of crime, I was excited to find another way of helping people and saving more shelter dogs." The dogs used for this program may not be the ideal service dogs for those with physical limitations, but they still must have stellar temperaments with

calm, reassuring demeanors.

The dogs trained for the Child Advocacy Dog Program provide support, comfort and confidence to children who have experienced or witnessed physical, emotional or sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Sheri refers to assistance dogs as "technology you can hug."

Texas Hearing and Service Dogs is also in the beginning phase of a new pilot program called Honor Dogs. In collaboration with the Travis County Sheriff's Department, offenders at the Del Valle prison facility, located outside of Austin, Texas, will have the opportunity to work with dogs that have recently been rescued from shelters. The offenders will lay the groundwork for further training by teaching the dogs basic obedience and working on their social skills.

As a non-profit organization, THSD is always in need of volunteers. When asked what their greatest volunteer need is Sheri told us, "Weekend Foster Families. The dogs are in training and work hard throughout the week, and what they really need is a person or family to help them relax, have fun and provide additional socialization opportunities."

Weekend Foster Families pick up their dogs on Friday evening and return them on Sunday afternoon or Monday morning. Weekend fostering is an ideal way for individuals and families to serve their community.

Sheri, her staff and volunteers are extremely proud of the services they provide to their community and throughout the State of Texas. Their passion about saving homeless dogs and providing service dogs to those in need is apparent. They encourage individuals, groups and organizations to tour their facility, or to schedule a representative to come speak to your group or organization about the impact service dogs make and the lives they change.

To learn more about the amazing work Texas Hearing and Service Dogs is doing or to discover ways you can help, visit www.servicedogs.org or call toll free 877-TEX-DOGS.



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