

Therapy breakthroughs have gone to the dogs

By Michaela Kennedy

Aiko, a young yellow Labrador retriever, runs inside an enclosed fence with some canine cohorts. Unbeknownst to the dog, Aiko has recently passed an exam that qualifies him as a "therapy friend," a dog trained in pet-assisted therapy.

Gary Cournoyer, the Lab's new owner, says Aiko has made great progress since he was adopted from a rescue league in New London, Conn., last September. Cournoyer didn't think about training Aiko initially, but a colleague told him about a behavior class for therapy dogs that was soon to start. Cournoyer enrolled the then one-year-old Lab.

Aiko completed a course in behavior training, offered by the Windwalker Humane Coalition for Professional Pet-Assisted Therapy. The coalition is a Rhode Island-based organization that offers training programs and educates people on the benefits of pet-assisted therapy. Aiko passed his credentialing test with flying colors. Now, he will begin his career in pet-assisted therapy with his guardian, Cournoyer, a seasoned healthcare professional and active supporter of pet-assisted therapy programs.

Cournoyer is vice-president of Windwalker, a group of professionals that recommend the involvement of animals in therapy programs. Cournoyer is an administrator at the Newport County Community Mental Health Center as well, and has witnessed first-



Gary Cournoyer recognized the power his Labrador retriever, Aiko, had to help children open up in stressful situations.

Photo by Michaela Kennedy

hand the deep chords that the animals touch with hurting humans.

According to its Web site, Windwalker creates and supports legislation, advocates for professional pet-assisted therapy programs and provides professional development and mentoring in professional pet-assisted therapy. "Rhode Island was one of the first states where therapy dogs have the same privileges as service dogs that work with people with disabilities," Cournoyer said.

The coalition provides professional pet-assisted therapy services as well as education programs that introduce the profession. Cournoyer says he would like to

see Windwalker expand its programs, such as creating a fund to support companion animals for people who could not afford them, or providing education about the link between domestic abuse and animal abuse. "If domestic abuse is reported, we call to see if there are pets and if they are okay. And vice versa, if an animal abuse incident gets reported, we call to make sure the kids are okay," Cournoyer explains.

Cournoyer was asked to create a one-credit course on pet-assisted therapy. That course now is offered at the Community College of Rhode Island. "We have social work interns who took the class

last year and signed up for the class again this year," Cournoyer said of the popularity of the course with medical and social work professionals. "We're pushing to be a more clinically-oriented program," he adds.

Years before he became an advocate for pet-assisted therapy, Cournoyer recognized the power animals had to help stressed children relax, even open up. As a school social worker, he would bring in old pictures he had of pets, "The kids would see the pictures and talk about their own pets. There was a link," he said.

Cournoyer went on to see the progress made with clients in therapy sessions with his previous therapy friend, Cisco. About five years ago, Cournoyer trained Cisco as a therapy assistant. "He would create a bridge that the kids would walk over," Cournoyer recalls. The chocolate Labrador worked right up until last year when he was diagnosed with cancer. "He passed away the first week in August," Cournoyer remembers.

Every day now Aiko goes to work with Cournoyer at the health center in Newport in order to get accustomed to clinical settings. Aiko knows the "Leave it" command, an important command for a dog that may be around medications. "You never know what might get dropped at a hospital," he adds.

For more information about pet-assisted therapy programs and events, visit online to www.windwalkercoalition.org.

Learn to be a public servant at 'clean government' course

Operation Clean Government will hold their Candidate School on Saturday, April 12, at the Quonset "O" Club.

The one-day session will run from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and costs \$95.

Reservations can be made through April 5 by sending a check payable to "Operation Clean Government" with a contact telephone number to OCG Candidate School, PO Box 8683, Warwick, RI 02888, or sign up online at www.ocgri.org.

Birds, birds and more birds at April fest

An all-day festival for bird enthusiasts will take place on Saturday, April 5, at the Norman Bird Sanctuary in Middletown.

From 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., discover ways to attract birds to the backyard or learn about feathered creatures that inhabit special places in Rhode Island. Whether it's improving birding skills, joining an informative walk, or enjoying nature activities with the little ones, there is something for bird enthusiasts of all ages at the Audubon Society's BirdFest 2008.

The full day programs costs \$35 and includes lunch. Alternately, people can choose from among several activities for both young and old at \$5 each for adults and \$3 for children.

For more information or to register, call 949-5454, ext. 3041 or e-mail emarks@asri.org or jlewis@asri.org.

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