

Children with special needs getting special friends

Dogs trained to help, protect autistic kids

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Two area families are set to receive service dogs through a new organization formed to assist families with special-needs children.

In a matter of weeks, families in both Bowling Green and Scottsville will receive trained Labradors to become companions to their autistic children - comforting them, guarding them and helping them navigate unique challenges.

Dana Hall, 36, of Bon Ayr said she got the idea for the Blessings Unleashed Foundation from a biblical passage, 1 Peter 4:10 - "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms (NIV)."

She took that to mean she should use her abilities and circumstances - she loves raising dogs, and her 2-year-old son, Cameron, is autistic - to help others.

Hall found out that service dogs can produce a drastic decrease in aggression in autistic children, as well as provide them safety and a bridge for social interaction.

"Instead of being the child that's different from everyone else, they become the cool child with the dog," she said.

In November, Hall started planning for her fledgling organization. A



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Four-year-old Rush Renshaw gets his face licked by Daisy, an 8-month-old yellow Lab that's now Rush's companion. Rush's family is implementing Daisy to protect, help and provide companionship to the autistic boy.



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litter of six yellow Labradors, chosen for their calm temperament and dependability, were bred to be trained and then placed with families.

Families can purchase the dogs at a cost starting around \$2,500 - which covers basic training, 12 weeks of individualized training with the child the pet will belong to, spaying/neutering, and all shots, check-ups and health certificates.

The program is open to children with physical, developmental, social and emotional needs and can help recipient families locate funding resources, grants, fundraising ideas and other financing options to defer the cost of an assistance dog.

Hall said she's looking for donations for families who could benefit from a dog, but can't afford one. She's also seeking temporary homes for several puppies that will eventually be placed with families.

"The puppy raisers are the life of our program. We can find the trainers and we can find the families," Hall said.

Pam Brown, a certified dog trainer and owner of "Dog's Day Out," a daytime boarding service for dogs in Bowling Green, is training Daisy, an 8-month-old Labrador that will soon belong to Bowling Green's Donna and Ryan Renshaw, and their 4-year-old autistic son, Rush.

The dog is being taught basic commands, public manners and to bring Rush back to his parents on command, should he stray.

Brown, who's also a physical therapist, said she's using her knowledge of disabilities to design Daisy's training regimen, which entails six weeks of training with Brown and six weeks of living with the family to get acclimated.

Donna Renshaw said her son greeted Daisy with curiosity at their first meeting, and the dog "nustled" him in return. The family, which also includes Rush's 10-year-old brother, Danny, who has a higher-functioning form of autism, and his 2-year-old sister, Mallory, is eager for Daisy's permanent transition in three months.

"We're the guinea pigs, but we're excited," Renshaw said.

She said she'd like Daisy and Rush to play games together, like fetch and hide-and-seek, and when Rush has emotional meltdowns - common to autistic children - she'd like for Daisy to sit beside him and

comfort him.

A source of difficulty for parents of autistic children is the looks they receive when their child has a public meltdown, she said.

"You know they're thinking, 'My God, can't you control that child. Can't you make that child stop screaming?' " Renshaw said. "You can't."

Sheri Hunt of Scottsville, the mother of 3-year-old Patrick, can identify with the Renshaws. She said people often unknowingly think autistic children are spoiled or bratty when they witness such episodes.

"My little boy is extremely loving. He will hug you and kiss you," Hunt said. However, "In crowded places, he gets overwhelmed very easily."

She said Patrick has met his prospective dog, Ace, and "they loved each other," as the new friends climbed playground equipment together.

Hunt thinks Ace will help her son to socialize better, in addition to providing her and her husband with a greater sense of security.

"The dog will be taught to block Patrick from going to the road," she said.

Hunt said she's thrilled with the program, as similar ones advertised online are significantly more expensive. The local Jaycees club, meanwhile, has offered to donate \$1,000 to the Hunts, if they can raise the remaining \$1,500.

- For more information about the Blessings Unleashed Foundation, e-mail dana@scrtc.com or call (270) 678-5908.