

September 3, 2021

Training Dogs Change Lives

Life with man's best friend is often spent lounging on the couch or taking long walks. The more than 500,000 service dogs in the United States work and fulfill a valuable role by helping people with physical and mental disabilities live more independently.

Thirteen years ago, Meritas Health Obstetrics & Gynecology Practice Administrator Brenda Herndon became a volunteer puppy raiser for KSDS Assistance Dogs Inc., in Washington, KS. To date, she has helped train five service dogs.

Brenda receives a puppy at 8 weeks and is tasked with socializing, preparing the animal to behave properly in public and teaching the dog how to ignore distractions, like food, children and other animals.

She also teaches about 50 basic commands that will be the foundation for more advanced training at the KSDS facility. Brenda explained a command, like High 5, will be the



Brenda helped train Deshka for a service dog program through KSDS Assistance Dogs Inc. Deshka now lives with James Riojas, MD, and his family, where she still serves an important role for the future of KSDS.

technique for how the dog turns off a light. Or the tug-of-war motion dogs enjoy during play will be the technique for the dog to open a door for a disabled person.

Service puppies live by stricter rules than most dogs, including they don't sleep with their trainers and treats are not the primary motivation used for training.

"We want praise to be the dog's reward. What if the client needed something and didn't have any treats? The dog may not do what was needed," Brenda said.

Not all dogs are appropriate as service dogs. During an evaluation, if a dog shows fear, aggression or exhibits a prey drive, like chasing squirrels, they "get a career change." Brenda laughed.

Brenda's last puppy, Deshka, was evaluated and approved to be a breeder for the KSDS program.

Training schools follow strict criteria with limitations on how many times a female can be bred. The females still need a calm temperament, proper behavior, etc.

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With Deshka ready to join the breeder program, she still needed a home where she could live during her breeding and until she retires. Brenda found a willing home courtesy of James Riojas, MD, who works with Brenda at Meritas Health OB-GYN, and his wife, Lisa Riojas, MD.

"We met Deshka when Brenda brought her to the office during her training. We felt a connection to her," Dr. Riojas explained.

Brenda is thrilled to watch Deshka's progress as she begins her next journey providing puppies so more people can benefit from service dogs. "When you train a service dog, every given moment is a teaching moment for the dog," Brenda said. "The dogs also help people with disabilities become more visible. Sometimes they feel like a burden. The dog takes the focus off the person and allows for more positive interactions."

Learn more about volunteer opportunities and upcoming fundraisers at ksds.org.



Clockwise: An ability to travel on an airplane is a requirement for a service dog. Brenda had a unique opportunity to see the first three puppies she trained now doing their jobs as service animals. Brenda and her son, Hunter, met their first puppy 13 years ago. She has now helped train five dogs.

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