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Service dogs help with psychiatric disabilities

By Wes Hagen/For the Valley News



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Members of the Psychiatric Service Dog Society spent a weekend at Clos Pepe Vineyard enjoying the area and each other's company. / Wes Hagen/Contributed

"Service dogs aren't only for the blind," says Dr. Joan Esnayra, founder and director of the Psychiatric Service Dog Society. "There are also service dogs for the mind."

About 50 service dog teams of the PSDS gathered from July 24-27 at Clos Pepe Vineyards near Lompoc.

The "West Coast Gathering" attracted service dog teams from Canada, Maine, Arizona, Nevada, Illinois, and all points in between. They came to meet in person, learn about training and service dog issues, and enjoy the Central Coast.

To be considered a service dog, the dog must mitigate the handler's life-limiting disability. While guide dogs (a type of service dog) have been used for centuries by the blind, the

use of service dogs for those with psychiatric disabilities is a relatively new tool. Members of the PSDS have used dogs for this purpose for more than a decade.

"The PSDS is an Internet-based support group for people using service dogs for psychiatric disabilities," says Chanda Hagen, hostess and co-winemaker at Clos Pepe, who uses an Italian greyhound to mitigate her disability. "We all connect through the Web every day, and we felt it was time for us all to get together on the West Coast.

"Using a service dog can make you feel self-conscious and isolated," she adds. "Having a supportive community and the love of a special dog is all we need to live productive lives — to get out into the world. The PSDS community and these dogs save lives every day."

Many of the attendees camped together at the vineyard, enjoying communal dinners each evening. The Saturday night dinner was a highlight, hosted in the elegant courtyard of Steve and Cathy Pepe's Tuscan-styled home at Clos Pepe. American Flatbread restaurant in Los Alamos donated its oven, staff and pizzas to the hungry PSDS visitors. Santa Maria style barbecue was also provided.

Two vans delivered small groups to local tourist destinations, assuring the PSDS teams had the chance to see Solvang, the annual Lompoc dog show, Santa Barbara, Hendry's Beach, Hearst Castle and La Purisima Mission.

The impact of these special dogs on their handlers is profound and heartwarming.

Dogs in attendance include Timmy, an aging springer-bassett-Lab, who spent months at Ground Zero in New York City in 2001 and 2002 providing comfort and support to rescue workers, law enforcement and recovery personnel. Timmy was the only therapy dog

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credentialed by the New York City Police Department to work there.

"We decided to go to Ground Zero once with Timmy to see if we could help," explained Neil A. Young, who also uses Timmy as a service dog for his narcolepsy, "and his work was so meaningful that we made trip after trip so Timmy could do his thing. There were people coming out of the site for a break from recovering remains — a grim job. The only smiles we'd see in those three-week periods was when someone spent some time with Timmy."

Many dogs seem to have an uncanny ability to sense human suffering and offer some emotional relief.

Elaine Malkin traveled from Maine with her service dog Jenn, a 4-year-old Shetland sheepdog.

Suffering from severe depression and panic disorder, Malkin rarely left the house. "I used to be afraid of the doorknob on my front door. It was like it was electrified ... I just couldn't bring myself to use it and leave the house."

Her life has been changed dramatically in the three years that Jenn's been working with her.

"When that happy little face appears and wants to go outside, I can't refuse. I've gone from being a hermit to the point where here I am. I left Maine with my dog, by ourselves, and journeyed all the way to California. That's a huge step for me. Jenn's love and care have enabled me to get off three heavy-duty drugs and reduce another medication."

Denise Wetzler of Arizona uses her 'Labramutt' Sweet Pea to mitigate her bipolar diagnosis as well as anxiety disorder. As Sweet Pea neared a year and a half old, she began to "alert" when Wetzler was entering a period of manic or anxious behavior.

Wetzler found that her episodes were manageable in the presence of the dog and began having Sweet Pea trained for public access and designated as a service dog.

Like Malkin, she has significantly reduced her medication as her dog helps her relax and engage in life. "My mood doesn't swing nearly as much with Sweet Pea, and I'm actually happy to go out into the world with her," Wetzler said.

Esnayra, the PSDS president and a trailblazer for those who use service dogs for mental health disabilities, watched the weekend event with a certain pride and maternal wisdom.

"Specially trained dogs can offer biofeedback support for their humans," Esnayra said, "meaning they can alert to oncoming episodes of illness, and respond appropriately. ... This is especially helpful when a disabled person is driving, or in a situation where their safety would be jeopardized."

Sue Alexander traveled from Breslau, Ontario, Canada to teach the assembled teams special training strategies. A certified dog behavior consultant, she also uses a service dog named D'fer to mitigate her symptoms of anxiety disorder and panic attack.

She offered this advice to the general public for training non-service dogs:

"The cache of a service dog team is the partnership they create. We train our dogs what to do, instead of setting ourselves up for conflict through punishment. One reason service dogs are so balanced and calm is they are with their people constantly. The work keeps them balanced and the relationship keeps them centered."

Wetzler summed up the experience this way:

"I've always felt that the PSDS (online) community gave me the strength to take myself and my dog into public and lead a real life. But now that I've

met all of these wonderful people and their dogs, it's like I have an army backing me up wherever I go and whatever I do."

For more information on psychiatric service dogs, including trips for training a dog, go to www.psychdog.org.

Wes Hagen is the vineyard manager at Clos Pepe Vineyards.

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