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'Psych dogs' offer valuable service

By Allie Kay Spaulding/Contributing Writer

If you have ever had a beloved dog, if you have ever thrilled to rows and rows of growing things thriving in the earth, you will understand what last Saturday was like at Clos Pepe Vineyard.

At the vineyard, where ripening grapes drooped in profusion, Chanda and Wes Hagen, vineyard manager and winemakers, hosted the first ever West Coast Gathering of the Psychiatric Service Dog Association.

More than 40 psychiatric service dogs and their owners from all across the country and Canada gathered for three days of socializing, touring and fine-tuning the training of their dogs.

I was invited to attend a training seminar at Clos Pepe, 29 rolling acres of French Burgundian pinot noir and chardonnay grapes at 4777 Highway 246, about 7 miles from Lompoc.

After spotting the long white neck of Florenzo, the diplodocus — a large, herbivorous dinosaur rising out of a grassy knoll just past the wrought iron entrance — I entered and followed a winding road bordered on the left with purple lavender, on the right with red and yellow Joseph's Coat roses growing at the head of each row of sun-splashed vines. Tradition has it that the French planted roses in their vineyards so that when powdery mildew appeared on the roses, they would know it was time to spray the vines.

The road led to the Hagen home and the nearby Pepe estate. In the Hagen's enclosed front yard, a semi-circle of people and perfectly behaved dogs were listening to Sue Alexander from Guelph, Ontario, Canada, explain aspects of the "psych" dog training.

Sue is the owner of a psych dog named D'fer, a Chesapeake Bay retriever. He was having a good roll in the grass as Sue spoke. The rest of the dogs, sitting quietly attentive within touch of their owners, ignored him.

It was an amazing assortment of animals. There was one handsome German shepherd, but the others ranged from a huge brown mastiff to a busy little pure-white Maltese. Black and white standard poodles, a large fluffy Bouvier des Flanders, some black Labs, several golden retrievers, a Basenji (African bush dog), a cross-bred German shepherd-Rottweiler — clearly psych dogs could be any breed.

And their owners? They fit no mold, either. There was, however, a common thread: their need for assistance.

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Joan Esnayra enjoys the seminar with her Rhodesian ridgebacks, Rainbow and Kenji. // Allie Kay Spaulding

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Three of the owners shared the nature of their psychiatric disorders with complete candor.

Chanda Hagen's condition defies formal diagnosis. She describes her attacks as "brain flips," a kind of panic disorder. From the time she was a little kid she had these seizures, often three or four a day.

Then six years ago she got Oliver, a small Italian greyhound. With the help of a local trainer, she led Oliver through the training he needed to become her service dog — how to behave in public, how to behave in a variety of unexpected situations, and what to do when his owner exhibits signs of an imminent seizure. Having Oliver with her has resulted in far fewer and far less severe seizures.

Michelle Ryan, of Issaquah, Wash., suffers from dissociative episodes that stem from childhood abuse and a serious car accident. She suffers from agoraphobia; for four years she refused to leave the house without her mother. Riding in a car, she would scream when another car came near.

Two and a half years ago, Michelle acquired and trained Horton, a beautiful golden retriever.

"How does he help you?"

"Horton grounds me. He is always with me. I can feel him, listen to him breathing, pet him. He is a check-and-balance for me. If he is calm, I am calm.

"Specifically, he reminds me to take my medication three times a day. He can tell if I haven't taken it by smelling my breath. And if I don't remember where the car is parked, he can find it.

"I have arthritis. Horton picks up things I drop. He can put clothes in the washing machine and in the dryer; he carries the mail into the house; he brings me my shoes. If I fall, he braces himself so I can pull myself up.

"Horton is a barrier between me and whatever makes me anxious. If I begin to panic, he comes to me, puts his paws on me so that I am reminded to calm down."

There is legal significance to the term "service dog." In 1986, a National Council on Disability recommended a law to give people with disabilities equal opportunities. The result was the Americans with Disabilities Act. Among its provisions was the definition of a service dog: an animal trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability. The law now requires that service animals be admitted to public places with their handlers.

Only recently have dogs that provide assistance to people with mental disorders been included in the "service dog" definition. In 2001 an organization called the Psychiatric Service Dog Society was formed to educate the public about this special type of service dog.

The PSDS Web site lists types of mental disorders, their symptoms, and the tasks which dogs can be trained to perform. Among the disorders are major depression, bipolar disorder, panic attacks, anxiety, agoraphobia, post traumatic stress, obsessive compulsive behavior and schizophrenia.

Some of the tasks that can be taught are tactile stimulation, staying with the handler and leading him to a safe place during a panic attack, alerting the handler to an incipient manic episode, waking up the handler and turning on lights during a nightmare, interrupting obsessive compulsive behavior, and buffering the handler in crowded situations.

PSDS was founded by Joan Esnayra of Arlington, Va. She was there on the lawn with Rainbow and Kenji, two beautiful, sleek Rhodesian ridgebacks. Joan, too, grew up in an abusive, violent environment. She suffers from bipolar and post traumatic stress disorder.

Kenji is 4 years old now. He is trained to alert her to a hypo-manic episode. Severe abuse such as Joan suffered causes permanent change in the brain. When something triggers the painful memory, the brain goes into flashback. Kenji can detect the change in her behavior and can alert her by bumping her elbow with his nose. His presence gives her confidence that she will be safe.

There was a remarkable energy among these people and these animals. The handlers were justifiably proud of their dogs. Why not? They were smart, healthy, well-behaved, valuable companions. But it was more than that. It seemed to me that the handlers were proud of themselves, proud to be confident enough to be there, to go on in spite of disability and have a life.

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