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NEWS

Going to the dogs: Pit bull, other breeds get therapy dog certification

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CRAIG S. McKIBBEN JR./Sun-Gazette

Lincoln looks around the room while sitting patiently with owner Dave Wertz of Linden.

Not a growl was heard among the canine crowd, and once tests were performed, most of the 15 dogs graduated from a therapy dog class Wednesday evening with flying colors.

According to Denise Greninger, co-owner of Sit Happens, which is headquartered at the 6465 N. Route 220 Highway, all of the dogs at the testing, at the 3500 W. Fourth St. training facility, were experienced in obedience training.

A variety of breeds, including a pit bull, completed the course Wednesday.

"This is our therapy dog prep class," she said. "They have all been through basic and advanced obedience classes, which are not required."

Renee Whitby, co-owner of Sit Happens, said the buisness started with a basic obedience class about a year and a half ago.

"We went to advanced obedience and then Canine Good Citizen and tonight is the therapy dog test," she said.

One of the dogs, an American Staffordshire terrier, named Lincoln, belongs to Dave Wertz, of Linden.

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The dog, also known generally as a pit bull, does not deserve its bad reputation, Wertz said.

“We started training him last August and we’ve had him a little over a year,” he said.

“We got him at the SPCA. I had another American Staffordshire terrier that was 13 years old and she passed away.”

He said at first, Lincoln was a little aggressive toward other dogs, but with training, Lincoln overcame that and was being friendly and playful with the other dogs in the arena at the evaluation Wednesday. He didn’t growl even once and was constantly wagging his tail.

“Because of his disposition and friendliness, he doesn’t have an aggressive bone in his body now,” Wertz said.

“He is a therapy dog — he passed today and he also passed the Canine Good Citizen test.”

Wertz said Lincoln had a problem with doorways and shiny floors for a while when he was first adopted, but now walks confidently by his side and even passed the part of the evaluation that dealt with separation anxiety. In that portion of the exam, the owner must leave the dog unattended on the floor of the arena for three minutes.

The dogs are not allowed to bark or whine while their owner is out of the room.

“I trained him with voice and hand signals,” Wertz said. “Consistency, repetition is the key.”

The dogs are not trained with treats, he said. Instead, when a dog does well, praise is the reward.

It took Lincoln two to three weeks of training to get the basic commands down, Wertz said.

The 65-pound, black and white dog may look intimidating to some, but Wertz said he is gentle, even in a room crowded with preschool children.

“We will go to nursing homes, wherever we’re needed now,” Wertz said.

Other breeds were in the evaluation as well and Greninger said all but a couple passed their evaluation for therapy dog certification. Many of the dogs, she said, were either rescued dogs or had been adopted from the Lycoming County SPCA.

Josh Rieders, 13, of Williamsport, was the youngest dog owner on the floor. His yellow Labrador retriever, Sampson, also passed the exam.

“We’ll take him into nursing homes every weekend and visit with people,” Rieders said. “This makes people happy — they like to see dogs.”

Jane Spuller, 75, was the oldest dog owner there, with her golden retriever, Nicky.

Other breeds, including Jack Russell terriers, an airedale and a poodle, were at the evaluation as well.

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