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Pit bull makes grade as therapist

By Nicole T. Lesson | South Florida Sun -Sentinel

Posted July 14, 2003

Amber, a year-old pit bull, has her work cut out for her.

The newest pet therapy dog with the Humane Society of Broward County, she is the first purebred American Staffordshire terrier, commonly known as the American pit bull, to be selected for the program.

Pit bulls have a reputation for being vicious, but Amber's owner is trying to change that.

"Amber absolutely loves people," said Sunrise resident Wendy Hendricks. "She knows no race, young, old, handicapped, rich or poor."

As a pet therapy dog, she will visit adults in hospitals, nursing homes and retirement communities who are in need of comfort. And, in a few weeks, she will be tested to determine whether she will be allowed to visit children.

Hendricks, a volunteer like all of the other dog owners enrolled in the program, is eager to change people's minds about pit bulls.

"I am so excited. This is a huge step in the right direction to start working on people's perceptions and help people feel better," said Hendricks, who adopted Amber from the Humane Society in December. "I can't wait to share Amber with everyone else."

Marni Bellavia, the education partnership coordinator for the Humane Society, also can't wait to get Amber started in the program.

"Amber epitomizes the breed, and she will be a great ambassador in the community," said Bellavia, who runs the pet therapy program. "We want to educate people on pit bulls in general -- they get such a bad rap. We also don't want to sugarcoat it but show the other side and help change the perception."

After passing a pet therapy test this week, the 60-pound, fawn-colored pit bull was given a photo identification badge along with a green-and-white cape embroidered with "Pet Therapy Dog" and "I love working for hugs and kisses" on each side. Amber pranced around and wagged her tail in excitement, almost as if she knew what she had accomplished.

Hendricks said she thinks she and Amber will be a successful pet therapy team.

"I have read stories, heard and seen firsthand how pet therapy can make someone's day brighter or even make someone overcome an obstacle," Hendricks said. "I hope that Amber and I together can educate people, change people's overall perception of the pit bull and, hopefully, make someone's day brighter by reaching out to them and sharing with them Amber's joy of living and loving."

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To qualify for the program, pets must pass evaluations on temperament, touch, obedience, interaction with people and behavior around medical equipment.

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During the test at the Humane Society in Dania Beach, Bellavia was in frequent close contact with Amber's face, put her hands in the dog's mouth, pinched her body to see if she had discomfort anywhere and hugged the dog to see how long it would take for Amber to pull away.

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The therapy program, in its 17th year, includes a wide range of dog breeds, including one pit bull mix. The 140 dogs range in size from 3 pounds to 128 pounds. There also are two cats in the program. The therapy animals visit 71 hospitals, nursing homes and other sites.

"We are always looking for more therapy dogs. We have 60 facilities on a waiting list," said Bellavia.

Nicole T. Lesson is a reporter for the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, a Tribune Publishing newspaper.

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