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Local News

Pit bull belies breed's bad reputation

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By Pat Pheifer

Star Tribune of Minneapolis

BAYPORT, Minn. -- It took a few minutes for Herb Isakson, 81, to smile as he sat in the hobby room at Croixdale with about a dozen other senior citizens recently. But his face split into a huge grin when Ruby crawled into his lap and snuggled in.

Ruby is a pit bull. She also is a certified therapy dog.

Those two statements seem incongruous, but Ruby's owners, Pat and Lynn Bettendorf of Scandia, Minn., are trying to change all that.

While the words "pit bull" evoke images for some people of dog fighting and brutal attacks on humans, the residents at Croixdale, an independent assisted-living and memory-care facility in Bayport, visit with Ruby every other week and certainly seem to relish cuddles and kisses with the 56-pound pooch.

"He reminds me of the dog I had," said Irene Kreutz, who turned 94 on Christmas Day. "He's a wonderful dog. Look how he listens," she said as Ruby cocked her head at another resident as if to say, "What?"

Mary Jo Ducklow, activities director at Croixdale, said she doesn't have any concerns about Ruby's breed.

"When they're a therapy dog, they've gone through all that training," she said. "I mean they're trained with wheelchairs running over their paws, for goodness sakes."

And the residents? "You can see them relax when they're petting the dog," she said.

Pit bulls' bad rep

The public perception of pit bulls as inherently dangerous is fueled by news reports such as the Aug. 16 death of a 7-year-old Minneapolis boy who was killed by the family's pit bull, which previously had bitten two people and was kept chained in the basement.

In the wake of two severe dog attacks in St. Paul, DFL state Rep. John Lesch said last June that he will introduce legislation next year to ban five types of dogs in Minnesota -- including pit bulls and Rottweilers.

Minneapolis is considering placing more restrictions on dangerous dogs, and Apple Valley, Minn., has proposed restricting some breeds to industrial areas.

Pit bulls don't belong to a particular breed. The American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier all are often called pit bulls.

Watching the Bettendorfs with Ruby, it's easy to see why they insist the problem is bad owners, not bad dogs. The Bettendorfs own other dogs, including another pit bull, Tiger, and another certified therapy dog, Venus, a not too bright but awfully sweet Rottweiler.

"Ruby is not the exception," Pat Bettendorf said. "There's a lot of good pit bulls out there. We're not saying these breeds are for everybody, but it's just training and socialization, training and socialization. You do have to be the alpha, but with any dog, really, you have to be alpha. It's not a light responsibility."

The rescue of Ruby

Ruby was just a puppy when she was found three years ago, abandoned and starving in an empty

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house in the northern suburbs. Most of her fur had fallen out. She spent three weeks at an animal hospital before her rescuers set out to find her a foster home.

The Bettendorfs weren't in the market for another dog, but after being asked three times, they agreed to take her "just for the Thanksgiving holiday weekend."

After Thanksgiving dinner, she crawled onto the loveseat and fell asleep in a guest's lap.

She is trained and socialized at least once a week at Total Recall, a dog obedience school in Hugo, Minn., run by a retired St. Paul police officer and his wife. Ruby underwent rigorous testing to be certified by Therapy Dogs International.

Last February, she received the Minnesota Veterinary Medical Association Animal Hall of Fame Companion Award. Recently, she was given an achievement award from the Animal Farm Foundation in New York.

Senior centers aren't Ruby's only turn in front of an audience. A year ago, she auditioned for the play "Cheaper by the Dozen" at the Lakeshore Players in White Bear Lake, Minn., Pat Bettendorf said.

She did well but was rejected because of her breed, he said. Two weeks later, when the dog that was cast didn't work out, the Bettendorfs got a call: "Is Ruby still available?"

They canceled a vacation to make her available.

As a therapy dog, Ruby visits Croixdale and the Margaret Parmly Residence in Chisago City. Bettendorf said he's talking with officials at Gillette and Children's Hospitals in St. Paul about taking her there, too.

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Pirate77 wrote: January 23, 2008 10:58AM

Say what you will about any breed. It all comes down to training and care. I've been around pit bulls for 20 years and they are one of my favorite breeds. It's the people who train them to be aggressive or don't take proper care of them who are to blame when something bad happens.



Anonymous wrote: January 23, 2008 11:29AM

Its really nice for a change to see a positive story. Thanks to the media people have a tendency to label wrongly. Its the bad people that have them that are to blame not the dog! My parents had a kennel and Ive handled dogs as long as I can remember. The meanest dogs you never hear about are small breeds! Guess you never hear that because they are not big enough to inflict any major damage, therefore never make the news!



roxy wrote: January 23, 2008 3:29PM

Kudos! It's great to see stories like these. Pit bulls are very intelligent dogs and can make exceptional pets when you take the time and effort to train and properly care for them. My pit bull is the most loveable dog I've ever had.

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