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Penn Vet Working Dog Center: Year in Review

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PENN VET WORKING DOG CENTER

Year in Review

BY JILLIAN MARCUSSEN

Just one year after the grand opening of the Penn Vet Working Dog Center, the seven dogs of the inaugural class are barely recognizable. Now more than five times their original size, these “super pups” have each developed an amazing ability to search that surprises even Dr. Cindy Otto, the Center’s Director and Founder.

“We have always known that dogs have an incredibly acute sense of smell, but we are constantly blown away by the progress of the dogs in our program,” says Dr. Otto. “I don’t think there’s a challenge they can’t meet. We are truly producing some of the best-trained detection dogs in the world.”

The dogs in this impressive inaugural group – each donated by breeders from across the country and fostered by dedicated volunteers – are now ready to graduate and take on new challenges. For Socks, a yellow Labrador Retriever, this will mean serving as an integral member of the Penn Police. Socks will detect explosives on campus in her new role. Thunder, a chocolate Labrador Retriever, will go on to pursue search and rescue training. PApa Bear, another chocolate Labrador Retriever, and Bretagne, a Golden Retriever, will train as diabetic alert dogs. Local police and fire departments have also expressed significant interest in the remaining dogs, and conversations about their futures are ongoing.

There were many important individuals involved in the care of these canines throughout the year. In order to ensure that the fitness and training needs of each dog were met, some 200 volunteers logged more than 3,000 hours. Through a unique partnership with New Leash on Life, a prison-dog training program that is dedicated to improving the life of inmates and saving the lives of dogs, as well as many interactions with the Penn undergraduate and staff communities, the dogs received the individualized attention and care they needed in order to be successful.

“Our volunteers have shown the utmost dedication to our program,” adds Pat Kaynaroglu, Volunteer Coordinator for the Working Dog Center. “We really couldn’t do what we do without their enthusiasm and devotion to both the dogs and the work being accomplished here.”

This summer, the Center also brought the world of working dogs to middle school students with the first annual Canine Handler Academy. Through this weeklong, hands-on learning experience, students witnessed the amazing talents of detection dogs and saw first-hand what it takes to train dogs that will go on to serve our country.

All of this progress over the past year was made possible through private support from many individuals, corporations, and foundations. A wonderfully unique gift of a van by



Top to bottom: Trainer Jonathan Ball sits with Thunder prior to a search; Training Director Annemarie DeAngelo works with Bretagne in the outdoor agility course; one of the new class of pups has its teeth brushed; Jonathan Ball works with Ohlin during ovarian cancer detection training.



Left: Dr. Cindy Otto poses with McBaine. Below: Wawa Store Operations Director Terrance Herling and mascot Wally Goose present Dr. Cindy Otto with a check for the sponsorship of Ronnie.



Robin and Mark Rubenstein allowed for off-site training opportunities for the dogs at facilities such as the Philadelphia International Airport. The Center is also grateful for a grant from Home Depot that enabled the construction of a half-acre agility course located directly behind the training center.

And there is more to come! Exciting, new projects are already underway. The second group of dogs to join the program, Ohlin, a chocolate Labrador Retriever; McBaine, a Springer Spaniel; and Tsunami, a German Shepherd, are being trained for cancer detection in a groundbreaking program that has garnered significant attention from the public and media alike.

In addition to welcoming additional donated pups, the Working Dog Center also aims to launch an in-house breeding program in the coming year. In her role with the Penn Police, Socks will be readily accessible for breeding with other top-tier detection dogs.

Another goal for the Center's second year of operation is to identify a sponsor for every dog in the program. Individual, corporate, and foundation sponsorships are available. If you are interested in supporting one of the dogs at Penn Vet's Working Dog Center, please contact Jillian Marcussen at jillian2@vet.upenn.edu or 215-898-4235.

As the Working Dog Center looks to the future, the legacy of the inaugural class will be carried forth by the next generation of puppies, including newcomers Pacy, Ditto, Jesse P, and Gus – all named, as their predecessors were, in honor of dogs that served on 9/11. We look forward to seeing this new class of canines in action as the Working Dog Center continues to lead the way in breeding and training the world's best detection dogs. 🐾

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