

Experienced dog trainer finds a home

By SUSAN TAUBER



Part of Judy Kershaw's job is working with students at Leader Dogs for the Blind. Here, she works with Dave Oberhart from Iowa and his dog, Otto. (Photos by Allen Schlossberg)

After training, raising, boarding and showing dogs for 12 years, Judy Kershaw is ready to settle down. As the new trainer for Leader Dogs for the Blind School, she said she's found what she wants to do.

"After 12 years of playing games, I'm ready to settle down to business," said Ms. Kershaw. "Being at Leader Dogs is doing something constructive with my life and also having fun. There's a depth of experience, meaning and purpose to what I'm doing. This is my home. I know I've found what I want to do."

Though Ms. Kershaw, who lives in Algonac near her family and with her pet German shepherds, is the first woman dog trainer at the school that opened in 1939, she discounts this aspect.

"I'm not a woman's libber. I'm just one of the felines here. I'm a member of a special team of four trainers in my group and a bigger team of 17 trainers."

However, just the fact that she was hired is a compliment to her abilities to do the job.

Harold Pocklington, director of Leader Dogs for the Blind, said Ms. Kershaw applied for a job as dog trainer just as he and others were thinking of hiring a female trainer. Ms. Kershaw contacted the school three years ago, informing Pocklington of her interest in joining the staff. Since she was hired in December 1977, Pocklington said she's become "a fixture."

"SHE'S A NATURAL, doing a fine job. She can throw snow with the best of them," said the director.

The question of whether a woman

could handle the job physically was something Ms. Kershaw had to answer.

"The people were wondering if I could handle large groups of dogs. I've handled 18 to 20 dogs in exercise runs. They wondered if I could pick up a German shepherd and put in into the tub for a bath. I own four shepherds. My big boy, Ben, weighs over 100 pounds. I can put him in the tub myself," said the woman who dresses for work in the same light blue jeans and white shirt her cohorts wear.

"They were wondering if I could take the physical stamina of working the dogs each day. As a trainer, I ran around the ring for hours."

Ms. Kershaw is used to being part of a man's world. She's worked with dogs over 15 years, her love affair with them beginning after she bought her first shepherd puppy 14 years ago.

It was after attending her first dog show that she knew she was hooked. She moved from the Detroit area to Pennsylvania, where she worked with one of the top dog handlers, Betty Irwin. After branching out on her own,

Ms. Kershaw showed and trained dogs, ran dog shows, handled breeding and boarding operations, worked with veterinarians, and even done behavior research with puppies.

THOUGH SHE'S worked with almost every registered breed of dog, the German shepherd remains her favorite.

"I'm part shepherd," she said. "I relate well to them."

Working with different breeds at Leader Dogs for the Blind School presents no problem to Ms. Kershaw. She realizes there are certain characteristics to each breed.

She's also familiar with early animal behavior, particularly kindergarten

ten training, the area of her research and country-wide lectures.

"In the first 16 weeks of a puppy's life, his basic character is set. He learns to answer to his own satisfaction who is boss—man or him. His attitude to learning and experiences is harder to alter after 16 weeks. This is when he learns if it's fun to look forward to learning or not."

"In the first three months, you can teach a dog a tremendous amount with games. If learning is fun to him, then even at 5 years of age he'll still have a good attitude for learning," she explained.

Since becoming a leader dog trainer, Ms. Kershaw has also had to have a good attitude for learning. Even with her experience in handling animals, she's had to learn new things in handling leader dogs and working with the blind students.

Ms. Kershaw is an apprentice trainer at the school. Her apprenticeship will continue for an indefinite length since, she said, there is no school one can go to to learn her job. The ability comes from on-the-job training.

SHE'S HAD to learn to give directions to blind students without using her hands to point.

"That was hard to learn," she said. "I learned not to point by sitting on my hands while giving directions."

Learning to "read" a dog through its harness, instead of its leash, was another new technique for her as was teaching a dog to think instead of to the person's command as it does in obedience training. Leader dogs are trained to cross a street after a command is given only after they think it is safe. If it isn't a safe time to cross, they know to resist the command.

A sense of humor is a big asset for being a good trainer. Ms. Kershaw remembers one time working a dog in the winter and falling down on the ice. A person stopped his car and offered to help her, thinking she was one of the students.

"I was too embarrassed to tell him I was one of the trainers," she said.

Until the end of November, Ms. Kershaw and the other trainers are working with a string of dogs. They work three or four each morning during the week, another set each afternoon.

IT TAKES four months to train a leader dog. Each month represents a different training stage. At the end of the four months, the trainers with three years or less experience work the dogs while blindfolded. In fact, they spend an entire day blindfolded, checking into the dorms in the morning, eating their meals without seeing what they're eating.

"It gives us a tremendous amount of respect for the blind students. It takes a lot of work and courage for them to come here. Being blindfolded makes us aware of the way they feel."

When Ms. Kershaw isn't in the greater Rochester area or in downtown Farmington with a leader dog, she spends time with her parents, brothers and sisters. Her hobbies include playing the piano ("mostly classical music"), playing folk songs on the guitar, swimming, bowling, camping, singing in a choir, target shooting, "at nothing" and cooking.

Beginning in December, her time for hobbies will be limited. She'll be living at Leader Dogs for the Blind School with the next class of students for one month.

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