

Rescue dog comes to rescue of foster kids



Forward This
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Lilly Mae was destined to be a breeding dog at a puppy mill until her heart murmur was discovered, and then she was abandoned at a high-kill shelter.

Northwest Boxer Rescue saved her the day before she was to be euthanized.

She spent six months in foster care until eventually finding her forever home in Keizer.

The 2-year-old pooch has brought comfort and joy to Shaney Starr and her husband, Greg, helping fill a void in their hearts left by the passing of their boxer Bubba and their Jack Russell terrier Ziggy.

But maybe Lilly Mae survived for another reason.

She's about to become Oregon's first canine court-appointed special advocate, or CASA dog. She'll soon be providing comfort and joy to local foster children going through child protective service hearings.

Shaney Starr, executive director of CASA of Marion County, believes Lilly Mae has the perfect background and temperament for this role. Like many of the children she will provide support to, Lilly Mae has been abused, neglected and abandoned.

"Lilly Mae's story of her first two years is parallel to so many of our kids in foster care," Starr said. "She has so much love she wants to give to people and her desire to be loved on in return, along with her gentle demeanor, made me think this could work."

Lilly Mae was "sworn in" by Marion County Circuit Court Judge Cheryl Pellegrini on Thursday. The Judge reportedly wrote a special pledge for the momentous occasion, and Lilly Mae practiced raising her right paw.

She joins a team of 130 active volunteers who have been screened and trained to serve an average of 600 abused and neglected children living in foster care in Marion County.

CASA volunteers are the heart, soul, and conscience of an underfunded and overburdened child welfare system. They are appointed by a judge to advocate for the best interests of children and give them each a voice in court.

A volunteer must be 21, have a passion for children in the community, pass criminal background checks, have good written and verbal communication skills, be able to complete and maintain training, be available to attend court hearings, and be willing to commit to the program for at least two years.

Lilly Mae received special dispensation for a couple of the requirements.

She has completed more than seven months of training on her way to becoming an owner-trained assistance dog. But it's her gentle temperament and innate ability to sense human emotions that make her perfect for this assignment.

"She's very sensitive to people's emotions," Starr said. "She knows who needs love."

When accompanying Starr to the CASA office in Keizer, it's not unusual for the 70-pound white boxer with distinct brown markings around her eyes to single out a CASA staffer who needs comfort most.

"Staff may have had something happen work related or in their personal lives, and they needed some Lilly Mae time," Starr said. "She tunes in real well."

Imagine her providing unconditional support to abused and neglected children at the most trying time of their lives. The hope is for Lilly Mae to help them overcome any anxiety, tension, stress or fear they might experience as they go through child welfare proceedings and are faced with making courtroom appearances.

She's sure to win the hearts of not only foster kids, but volunteers, courtroom staff, even the judge. In fact,



Child volunteers pet Lilly Mae as the rescued boxer makes one more visit to a Marion County juvenile courtroom Aug. 28 before her official swearing-in ceremony on Thursday. KELLY JORDAN/STATESMAN JOURNAL

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Shaney Starr
Executive director of CASA of Marion County

she already has.

Lilly Mae and Judge Pellegrini, the presiding juvenile judge for the county, hit it off the first time they met in July when the dog did her first training session in a courtroom.

Starr needed the judge's blessing before pursuing the idea of deploying a CASA dog in court. Both women discussed using a comfort dog as part of "what can we do to get our kiddos to feel safe coming to court and not cause more stress and anxiety on them."

The plan was announced last December during a CASA of Marion County luncheon, with Starr vowing the program wouldn't cost the organization a dime. A donor covered about a third of the training costs, but she and her husband paid for most of it, along with all the other expenses that come with providing Lilly Mae a forever home.

Lilly Mae is a lucky dog. She fancies her morning walks at the neighborhood park and sitting on her flagstone patio and keeping watch over her yard.

She loves all types of treats, but her favorites are mini Milk-Bones, which are only 5 calories each. She has an ever-expanding collection of toys. Three new ones arrive monthly in her BarkBox of goodies. She prefers toys with squeakers.

She has to take medication with breakfast and dinner for her heart murmur, which disqualifies her from being a full-fledged service dog.

She will need a handler with her at all times in the courtroom, and that will be Starr. They started training in January with the Joys of Living Assistance Dogs.

When founder and director Joy St. Peter did her initial temperament assessment and evaluation of Lilly Mae, she described her as "calm as a cucumber."

St. Peter said she looks for signs in a prospective assistance dog showing that he or she is not only sensitive to people's emotions but capable of handling them.

"She shows all of the tendencies of being able to

handle the stress of the job," St. Peter said.

Lilly Mae's first visit to the courtroom was a walk in the park. She spotted a squirrel moments before entering the building, but it didn't distract her from her mission. One of the guards at the security gate patted her down around her collar and leash. Lilly Mae didn't flinch.

After being fawned over by Judge Pellegrini's staff, St. Peter discussed with Starr the best placement for Lilly Mae during court proceedings. The dog will sit alongside a child in the courtroom. She may even put her chin on the child's leg. Starr, as Lilly Mae's handler, will be seated next to the child as well.

Once Lilly Mae is sworn in and officially placed "in service," a request for her services may be made by a CASA volunteer or caseworker if it's believed her presence would be beneficial to a child.

"We know that dogs can help to lower stress levels and provide a sense of calm and safety to people," Starr said. "Hopefully, Lilly Mae can be a positive for the kiddos coming to court and help bring a smile and some joy to an otherwise pretty unpleasant experience."

Lilly Mae will be the first of her kind in Oregon. Other states do have comfort dogs in their court systems. Lilly Mae will be available only to serve in juvenile dependency cases involving children in the foster care system in Marion County.

The National CASA Association doesn't know how many organizations use assistance dogs. It does know of established programs in at least three counties in New Mexico and Indiana, and one each in California, Tennessee, and Texas.

Other CASAs in Oregon will be watching and taking notes. Lane County has already made initial inquiries and is eager to see how the program fares in Marion County.

"There's a decent amount of pressure but a lot of it, to be honest, is self-imposed," Starr said. "The stress is about it not working out or not working how I want it to."

Some early affirmation came last week when her office opened a makeshift school supply store for foster children. A young girl who came to the event was completely enamored with Lilly Mae, calling her "my doggie."

"To see that joy on her face proved this is the right thing we're doing," Starr said.

And just maybe, Lilly Mae will have a paw in helping these children find a safe and permanent home — just like she did.

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