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PUSD students start Puppy Raising Program

By Elizabeth Jackman

Christmas came early for Peoria Police Department investigator Bill Weigt.

Three years ago, Dec. 17, Weigt was left paralyzed when he was shot during a gun battle with a murder suspect following a drug deal that went bad.

Last Friday morning, Weigt became the first person to receive a service dog in a unique program that is a partnership between the Foundation for Service Dog Support (FSDS), the Peoria Unified School District (PUSD) and the 100 Club of Arizona.

On Jan. 5, the first class of 12 students and puppies will begin training at Peoria High School in the district's first Puppy Raising Program. Once they are trained, all of the dogs in the program will be donated to wounded police officers, firefighters or military service members.

"What can you say, but thank you," said Weigt, who choked up when he was told the dog was being donated to him. "It is very humbling, I didn't think I needed help, but I took a couple of headers coming out of the shower and couldn't reach the phone."

He said he lives football, which he coaches, and drops his water bottle non-stop. He also drops his sunflower seeds a lot, which he says he is addicted to, his keys and cell phone. He said he also still has some weird spasms.

"Nine times out of 10, the item will land out of reach," Weigt said. "I started checking the Internet for assistance dogs and I tried to get a dog from the Humane Society."

Between the time it would take to train an adopted dog, which Weigt said wasn't available because he works full-time as a police investigator, and the high cost of a fully trained dog, neither option panned out.

FSDS founder and chief executive officer CJ Betancourt said that all too often, we hear early news stories of injured police, fire and military and then they seem to fade into obscurity.

"Though the attention fades, their disabilities do not," Betancourt said. "We believe that the community should not forget these individuals or the sacrifices they made for us. The gift of a trained service dog will give these individuals back some of the mobility and independence that their injuries robbed them of."

PUSD Internship Coordinator Jan Delgado said the class will meet three days a week for 90 minutes and students will receive four high school credit hours. Students will have the dogs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and take the dogs everywhere with them, classes, stores, buses, restaurants, and home at night.

The 100 Club, whose mission is to provide financial assistance to families of public safety officers and firefighters who are seriously injured or killed in the line-of-duty and to provide resources to enhance their safety and welfare, is providing names of individuals who would benefit from a service dog.

"They have indicated they have three police officers who were shot and are now paralyzed and a firefighter with a traumatic brain injury," Delgado said. "I have also received two referrals from the VA Hospital. How wonderful it is that these students are willing to help out these individuals."

Two of the students already signed up for the program are juniors, Kurt Abel, 16, and Chelsea Teel, 16.

"I heard about it last month and always wanted to do something with animals, so thought this would be great," Teel said.

Abel said he received a letter in the mail from the school several weeks ago and decided to enroll because he has always wanted to do something to give back to the community.

The first class of dogs to graduate will be in May 2010 and their new partners will receive the dogs permanently on that day.

"In order to successfully teach the puppies to assist with everyday activities, the program is in need of donations," Delgado said.

The program is in need of: old home phones with receivers; old cell phones without cases; touch lamp; Rubbermaid storage bins; craft leather strips for tugs; key rings; quilter's handles; orange traffic cones (from toy or sporting goods store); large stuffed dog to use for bandaging; first aid supplies; crates; elevated bowls with stands; paper towels; antiseptic/multipurpose spray; hand wipes; and monetary donations for vaccines and veterinary care.



Back row, left to right, Peoria Unified School District Internship Coordinator Jan Delgado holding Zeus, a 15-week-old yellow lab; Andrea Snyder, safety instructor for the Foundation for Service Dog Support (FSDS); Beverly Fuller, director of programs for the 100 Club of Arizona; Chelsea Teel, 16, student. Front row, left to right: Gail Meserve, service dog trainer; Bill Weigt, holding Gena, a 20-week-old lab-sharpei mix; and Kurt Abel, 16, student.

Financial donations can be mailed to: The Foundation for Service Dog Support, Inc., 15345 W. Port Royale Lane, Surprise, AZ, 85379. Visit the Web site at www.sdsupport.org.

For other donations, contact Delgado at 602-290-3628, or e-mail jdelgado@peoriaud.k12.az.us.

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