



15 MINUTES WITH: AMY DODGE

BY NAN BIALEK
PHOTO BY DAVID SZYMANSKI

Nearly 5,000 people in the Milwaukee area are touched by dog owner/therapy dog teams from Pets Helping People each year. In July, nonprofit pro Amy Dodge was named executive director of the organization, now in its 20th year, and she couldn't be more excited about the challenges ahead.

Who or what inspires you?

I think it's the volunteers and the dogs. When I first interviewed with this organization, I was coming off some pretty significant health issues. I've always volunteered and been involved with service organizations. I helped co-found Milwaukee Empty Bowls and I worked for a mental health provider, but I've always had that (commitment), ever since I was in high school. I heard of this organization when I was trying to find my new work home, and I just fell in love.

How does Pets Helping People work?

We work with a broad spectrum of individuals. Once our teams are accredited, we provide them with a placement opportunities list for facilities that have requested visits. There are over 120 facilities on that list, from Sojourner Family Peace Center to emergency rooms. We do some work with the women's correctional facility and the Congregational Home, and sometimes we do a school Read to Rover program. Once the handler/dog teams complete the training with us, they are given the list and then people can format it the way it works for them. They can go several times a week or once a month, whatever works best for them and the facility.

What characteristics make a good therapy dog?

First off, they have to have the right temperament. The dog has to be in the owner's possession at least six months and has to be at least 1 year old. You innately know if the dog is trying to be friendly and interact and doesn't have territorial issues — if they just want to be loved. Beyond that, some dogs know when you're hurt or down; they're intuitive. It's really a neat thing to see. And then basic obedience skills, which are very important for visits in a hospital environment, school or long-term memory care.

What kind of training do dogs and the volunteers complete?

The first step in our organization is making those basic criteria and then you're scheduled for an hourlong assessment, where we check basic obedience skills, how the dog behaves around medical equipment, and we handle them to make sure they can take strong petting and so on. We also teach owners to be advocates for their dogs. Once they pass the assessment, they go to training class with our professional trainer, Heidi LaCosse. At the end of the four-session class, the animals are tested with their handlers. If there is a section of the test that didn't work, you can come back and test for that section. Our goal is for everyone to be successful.

Tell us about Pets Helping People volunteers.

I think we've got about 165 on our team at this point. The individual who does volunteerism wants to lighten somebody's burden by bringing in their precious pup and interacting with them for a few minutes to make a difference. We aren't looking for somebody who has to have all the magic answers, but just to have the innate spirit in themselves that they see in their dogs.

Do you have a dog?

I grew up with dogs. Unfortunately, my career and family really doesn't lend itself to having dogs. We have our crazy cat, Taz.

For more information on Pets Helping People, go to petshelpingpeople.org.

MY FIVE FAVORITE THINGS!

1

Family first, including 6-year-old Taz, aka "Snoop Cat."

2

Engaging with friends. That to me is so important; it feeds the soul.

3

Being of service — through work, mentoring people going through breast cancer, and a lot of volunteering through my church.

4

Travel.

5

I love baking and decorating unique cakes.

