

Local woman, pet trained in dog therapy

BY HEATHER ELLWOOD
NEW LEADER STAFF WRITER

EAST BROOKFIELD — Heather Gablaski had always wanted to do something beneficial with her pets, and when she thought about training her dog, Bruno, to become a therapy dog, she knew it was a good idea.

Bruno, an 35-pound black lab, knows how to put a paw out, climb up with his front paws onto someone's lap, sit, shake, come when called, catch Frisbee — and be a best friend. Gablaski realized that since he was such a good pet, he would make the perfect therapy dog.

"He always licks people and wants to be patted, so I thought he would be good," Gablaski explained.

That is when she made the decision to find a place in Massachusetts to train him, and she learned about Dog B.O.N.E.S. (Dogs Building Opportunities for Nurturing and Emotional Support). The nonprofit, volunteer-based organization aims to provide affectionate, obedient, insured and registered dogs for therapeutic visitations to hospitals, nursing homes, schools and rehabilitation centers.

"Not many people know about this around here," she said, adding that she and her husband, Edward, had to travel from their home in East Brookfield out to Medford five times for the classes.

She heard about Dog B.O.N.E.S. through Second Chance Animal Shelter in East Brookfield, where she volunteers as one of the two dog adoption coordinators. Gablaski knew of one Doberman that had completed the Dog Bones training after being adopted from the shelter, and she thought it would be worth the trip.

The class exposes both the dog and human companion to environments the team would encounter on visits to hospitals, nursing homes, schools and other locations. Gablaski said that they trained Bruno to see how he

would react in certain situations, such as interacting with an individual in a wheelchair. "He was ready for the wheelchair and was good at it because my dad is in one," she said.

On another day, her husband had to pretend that he had a stroke and the left side of his body was not working, and Bruno was evaluated as to how he dealt with the situation. The dogs in Bruno's class were trained primarily for hospital and nursing home situations "because that is where Bruno would most likely to see things he wasn't used to," Gablaski said.

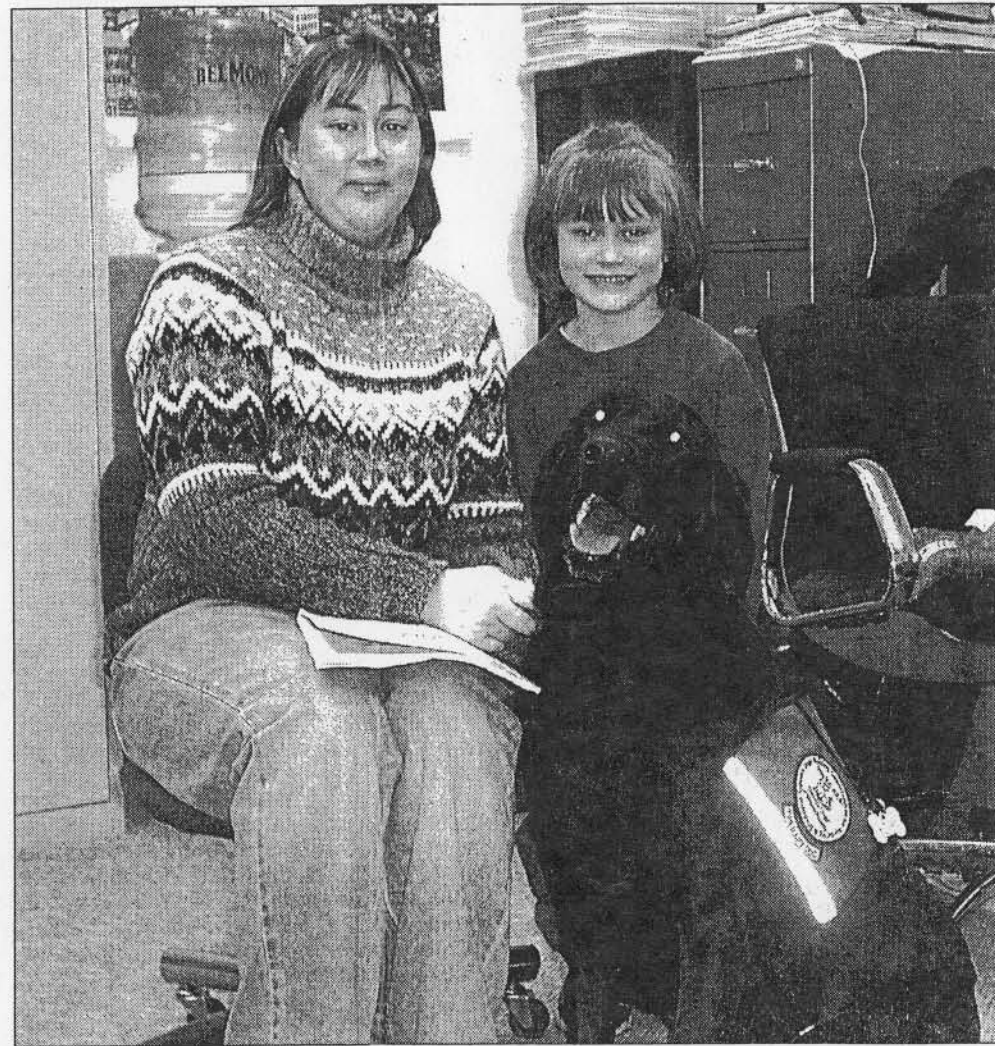
People also came in to talk about their experiences with their dogs during the training period. The group learned about patient confidentiality, individuals cannot communicate or move well and how to approach people with a dog. The dogs were also trained to work with walkers, wheelchairs and a lot of noise.

On October, Bruno passed his class test and now wears a vest to symbolize that he is a trained therapy dog. He is also fully insured. Gablaski and Bruno go to Life Care Center in Auburn one Saturday a month, but she would like to expand her Saturdays and fill them with visits to places in Spencer or the Brookfields.

Bruno was a Second Chance dog that Gablaski adopted two years ago. At the annual dog walk that Second Chance holds, Bruno received a Good Citizen Award for his manners and training.

"He (Bruno) was scared at first, but then he realized that people were going to pat him; he liked that," said Gablaski. "Now he gets very excited when I put on the vest and choke chain and tell him that we are going for a visit."

Gablaski can be reached at hgablas@massed.net for more information, and check www.therapydog.info/ for more information about Dog B.O.N.E.S.



Heather Ellwood photo

East Brookfield resident Heather Gablaski and her dog Bruno are trained in dog therapy and are able to visit nursing homes, schools and libraries. They are pictured with Gablaski's daughter, Jordan.