



Wag Rag

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT



NABI DAHLSTROM

By Wendy Dahlstrom

The idea of having a therapy dog has always intrigued me. I would read stories about the bond between the dog and their human partner and be amazed by the work that they did and the bond that supported them. I wanted to do this kind of work with a dog someday. I've had dogs all my life, from the time I was five when I kept bringing puppies from a littler down the street home and asking my parents if I could keep them. My parents finally gave in and let me keep *one* and that was the beginning of my connection with dogs. I've had all sorts of dogs from a mixed breed to a big German Shepherd to a little Westie. I was lucky to have found my husband,

Dennis, who is just as connected to animals as I am and we have continued to live with a variety of animals throughout our married life. After the death of my beloved Westie, I decided that I had the time and desire to really be intentional about the next dog I got. I had just retired after a full career in education but I wanted to continue doing meaningful work. I just didn't know what that would be. The only thing I did know is that I wanted it to include a canine partner.

At this time we moved to Anacortes from Yakima and I read about Dogs On Call (DOC) and what kind of work this organization was doing. It was exactly what I had dreamed about! This was a perfect fit for me and now all I needed was to find the right dog to work with. Dogs have always just come into my life at the right time but this was something new. I was going to intentionally pick the breed and dog and then train him/her to be a therapy dog. I started reading about different breeds and their characteristics and tried to find a match. I came upon the mini Australian Shepherd and learned about their need for a job and the intuitive nature of the way they communicate with their humans. The more I read, the more I thought this was the dog for me. I found a breeder nearby and finally, one cold December day, we met our little bug of a pup. We named her Nabi, which is Korean for butterfly, a name suggested by our daughter-in-law. I had never been so focused with a new dog as I was with Nabi. I read book after book on puppy training and pondered every aspect of her care and training. It was great fun but also very serious because we had a job to get ready for. We went to obedience training classes with a local trainer who was impressed with Nabi and how we seemed to understand each other. This was encouraging to hear but I was still worried. There were behaviors that I just couldn't get under control like nipping at my hands and ankles which is a breed characteristic but one that we needed to extinguish.



Nabi and I kept working and slowly we came to an understanding and I thought we were ready to begin with DOC so we signed up for their 6-week Therapy Dog Preparedness Course. Would we be ready? I hoped so. The day Nabi and I arrived for our first class we were both filled with anxiety and excitement in equal measure. The journey to this point had been full of small triumphs and seemingly big challenges but here we were, ready to take yet another step toward our goal as a DOC therapy team. This had been a dream for so long I couldn't believe that we were so close to seeing it become reality. We were met in the parking lot by trainers Deb and Sarah and several other classmates all with very excited, happy, well-loved canine partners. Training began immediately with a discussion about how we should allow our dogs to say 'hello' to each other. I never thought about the importance of how dogs meet and greet each other, but it made sense. This wasn't going to be the only time during the course that I would have that same thought. It seemed each week we would all be confronted with tasks that would challenge us and change the way we thought about this relationship between our dog and ourselves. Always with the mantra in the background: "Pay attention to your dog. Read their response and protect them from becoming overwhelmed or frightened." Each class had a different challenge. The first night was the all-important pre-test with each dog to check for any aggression or sensitivity to being handled by a stranger. This was the part that I was most concerned about. Because Nabi is a herding dog, she 'speaks' with her mouth not only by barking but by nipping, licking, and mouthing the people and other animals she meets. This is part of the breed characteristic and something I'd been working on minimizing since she came to live with me. It was getting much better as she matured and I thought she was at a point that we could begin the class but I was prepared to wait if she wasn't ready. This pre-test is very important. There can't be any signs of aggression to people or other animals because the teams will be put in very stressful situations at times, and the dogs need to be able to trust that they will be safe so they do not feel the need to protect themselves. That said, when it was our turn for the test Nabi passed with wiggles and sniffs after having her feet, ears, teeth, and tail examined and handled. We were in!

The classes were divided into two parts: the first being general obedience training like sit, stay, down, walking on loose leash, meeting and greeting people and dogs and the hardest was the 'stay' for 2 minutes. That is a very long time when you have a group of social dogs who are much more interested in playing than sitting. The second part of each class was a discussion of what we might encounter during our visits. We were exposed to lots of different distractions like balloons popping, loud angry voices, and various materials to walk on and, with the help of volunteers, different types of people we might encounter. We were taught how to approach both kids and elders and how to observe our dogs so they wouldn't get put in a situation that they weren't comfortable with. Remember the mantra: "pay attention to your dog."

Before we knew it, the six weeks were over and we all graduated. The next step was the full Love on a Leash Foundation for Pet Therapy test (the first step toward official certification), including the dreaded 'stay' for 2 minutes. Oh my! But when we sailed right through the test, it began to dawn on me that Nabi looked at these challenges differently than I did. To her, this was fun because it was her job and, as I was beginning to understand, she takes her jobs very seriously. The next step was to complete our internship which meant that we needed to go on 10 visits, 5 of which would be supervised by a veteran team. We were off and running. Once we completed our internship we would be able to get our official certification as a therapy dog team! Our first visit was to a retirement center where we visited residents in their apartments. Nabi seemed to sense that this was different and she was very calm and attentive during the visits. She would sit next to the resident and lean against them for pets. We'd only stay for 20 minutes or so but I loved meeting very interesting people and hearing about the different dogs they'd had in their lives. Our next visit was to an assisted living center. We entered public area where residents were socializing, some in wheelchairs. Nearby other residents using walkers were moving down the hall. There were lots of different sounds and smells that Nabi hadn't experienced before. I again was amazed at how calm she was. There was a woman in a wheelchair that couldn't talk but could use her left hand. She held it out and Nabi went right over and leaned against her so the woman could enjoy Nabi's soft fur. Nabi showed no fear of the wheelchair,

nor was she distracted by the activity in the hall. She was totally focused on this lady who couldn't talk but could feel the affection that Nabi was giving. Later, during the same visit, we were in a room where a gentleman was in a hospital bed. He and I were talking about his dogs and he couldn't see Nabi from the bed. Suddenly she just jumped on the bed and lay perfectly still and low so he could see her and touch her if he wanted. It was here that I realized that Nabi knew what her job was and she was ready and willing to work hard. Next we started visiting various school programs. This is my comfort zone as I was an elementary school counselor for years in Yakima. Again, Nabi showed me that she knew the difference between home behavior and work behavior. I knew that this type of dog needed a job and was very smart and willing to do anything that their human asked of them but to see this little mini Aussie, barely 18 pounds, in the midst of a classroom of busy active 2nd-graders who all want to hug and pet her at the same time was just amazing. This was where I truly understood the continual caution: "watch your dog for signs of stress, pay attention to your dog." I was learning through each of these experiences that I was the caretaker of my canine partner's comfort and safety and must take that responsibility very seriously.

We are still exploring different placements both in the schools and in the elder care community. That's what the internship process is all about. I know that we will find our place eventually, but wherever we end up the one thing I know for sure is that I've found a most willing partner and hopefully we will continue to help each other get better and better at our new "job" for years to come.



VOLUNTEER VIGNETTES

The following report from DOC member, Lindy Christopherson, exemplifies our commitment to the community as well as the profound impact our teams have. I'm sure we all recognize that doing what Lindy did, on Christmas day, is a profound and quintessential Christmas gift to those truly 'in need'.

“Christmas Day in Skagit County Juvenile Detention Center was quite celebratory. When we arrived, everyone was sitting in the lunchroom having tangerines--festive little treats. The atmosphere felt cheerful. I just immediately let Fisher off leash and had a very relaxed visit with everyone--there were about 10 kids--all guys. I put out a Christmas platter of candy which was used as rewards when someone got a question right, or guessed some measurement of Fisher that was closest to correct. The majority of the kids had seen Fisher at least once and so I had them tell me what tricks or tasks to have him do. Some of them asked if they could give him the hand signal for some of his tricks. Almost everyone was engaged and enjoying the reversal of the program--by having them basically run things. I also brought a Santa that recites ‘T’was the Night before Christmas’ and at the end of the hour I turned it on (I had played it when we first arrived too, but it was a bit chaotic at that time) and the orange-jump-suited, incarcerated young men sat quietly and listened with rapt attention and almost awe. I'm pretty sure most of them haven't had great childhoods and to see their reaction to the wonderful tale of the night before Christmas filled me with holiday joy.”



ASK THE TRAINER: “ULTRA SUPER SIT”

This month's "Ask the Trainer" is taken from a lesson by Dr. Ian Dunbar, a well-respected name in the world of dog training. Published with permission of the author, Dr. Ian Dunbar and the publisher — www.dogstardaily.com. NOTE: Dr. Dunbar is holding a training seminar in Portland... details here: <http://www.jamesandkenneth.com/store/show/EPO-011>

FOUR STEPS TO AN EMERGENCY DISTANCE SIT

With a little practice you can develop an absolutely rock-solid, long-distance sit-stay that can save you from most dangerous or embarrassing situations your dog could get into. The secret to off-leash control is to thoroughly integrate fun training into all of your dog's off-leash activities. Total

integration of training and play should be your aim from the very start. Interrupt your dog's off-leash activities every minute or so. Every time you interrupt an enjoyable activity by instructing your dog to sit, for example, and then allow him to resume the activity, you are reinforcing the dog's prompt sit with this powerful reward: allowing him to go back to playing. The more you interrupt your dog's play, the more you may reward him for sitting promptly. First practice the following exercises in safe, enclosed areas. This can be when your puppy is off-leash in your house or yard, when he is playing in puppy classes, during puppy parties, or when off-leash in dog parks. You can use a long line if you are in a very large area.

🐾 Every minute or so, run up to your puppy and take him by the collar. Praise the pup, offer a tasty food treat, and then tell him to go play again. At first try this in a fairly small area, such as your kitchen with no other distractions. Then try it with just one other puppy present. If you have difficulty catching your pup, have the other owner grab hers at the same time. Then try with a couple of other puppies present. Gradually increase the number of puppies and size of the area until your puppy is easy to catch when playing, for example, in your fenced yard. Use very high-value treats during this first exercise so your pup quickly comes to love having his collar grabbed.

🐾 Once your puppy is easy to catch, lower value treats will suffice. Now, instruct your puppy to sit each time after you take him by the collar. Use the food to lure the puppy into a sitting position, praise the pup as soon as he sits, offer the food as reward, and then release him and tell him to go play.

🐾 By now your puppy should feel completely at ease with your running up to reach for his collar. In fact, he probably looks forward to it, knowing he will receive a food reward *and* get to resume his play. You may find your puppy begins to sit automatically in anticipation of the food reward. This is good, because the next step is to instruct your puppy to sit before you reach for his collar. Run up to your puppy and waggle a treat under his nose. Once the puppy hones in on the food, use it as a lure to entice him to sit. Praise your puppy as soon as he sits, offer the food as a reward, and tell the puppy to go play. It is vital that you do not force the pup into a sit. Remember, if you have to rely on physical contact to get your dog to sit, you'll never have reliable off-leash distance control. If you are experiencing difficulties, go back to using high value treats.

🐾 When your pup sits promptly as you approach, you can teach him to sit from a distance. Again try this exercise around the house without distractions before trying it with other puppies present. Sit in a chair and without moving a muscle, calmly and quietly say, "Fido, Sit." Wait a second, then rush toward the puppy saying, "Sit! Sit! Sit!" in an urgent tone but without shouting. Praise your puppy the moment he sits, take him by the collar, and let him sniff the food. Then quickly take one step backwards, and instruct your puppy to "Come" and "Sit." If your puppy sits promptly, offer the food as reward and then let him resume playing.

As you repeat this over and over again, you'll discover that fewer and fewer repetitions of the instruction to sit are necessary before your puppy complies. Also, with repeated trials your puppy sits sooner and sooner and with you farther and farther away. Eventually your dog will sit promptly at a distance following a single softly spoken request. From now on, whenever your dog is off-leash, repeatedly and frequently interrupt his activity with numerous short training interludes. Ninety percent of the training interludes should be as short as one second. Tell your dog to sit and then immediately say, "Go play." Your dog's quick sit is proof that you have control, so you needn't push it. You needn't prolong the sit/stay. Instead, quickly tell your dog to go play so as to reinforce the quick sit. In one out of ten training interludes practice something a little different. Once your dog sits, instruct him to sit-stay or to down-stay. Or walk up to your dog and take him by the collar before telling him to resume playing. Remember that as with all training consistency is key. And do not ask your dog to do something that you cannot enforce, until you are sure he understands and is in compliance all the time.



CANINE HEALTH CORNER

NOTE: All decisions made about your dog's health should be done in collaboration with your veterinary professional. Information and suggestions contained in our "Canine Health Corner" should be used only as a general guideline. An additional resource for possible poisoning is the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center's 24-hour emergency hotline at 1-888-4-ANI-HELP.

The following is a reprint of an article by AP reporter, Sue Manning published recently. It is an issue that is of great concern to therapy dog owners/handlers as many of the venues we visit have a lot of potential dangers lurking on the floors. One of the commands we strongly suggest that all therapy dog owners teach their dogs is 'leave it' but even that requires extreme diligence from the owner/handler to spot the dangers *before* the dog gets to them. So we especially encourage what we call an 'automatic leave it' where the dog actually avoids things on the floor on their own. This requires a lot of practice and a lot of reinforcement. But even for pets who do not work as therapy dogs the dangers of things on the ground are very real and pose a threat many would do well to heed.

"Human medications including dropped pills sickened more pets in the United States last year than any other toxin. It's the third year in a row that human medications top the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' list of top 10 toxins, released Friday. Over-the-counter medicines with ibuprofen and acetaminophen, antidepressants and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder medicine topped the list. About a quarter of the 168,000 calls received by the hotline in 2010 were about pets who had swallowed human drugs, said veterinarian Tina Wismer, senior director of veterinary outreach and education at the center. The Pet Poison Helpline in Minneapolis, Minn., run by SafetyCall International, has handled more than 750,000 calls since 2004, said veterinarian Justine Lee, the help line's associate director of veterinary services. She estimated half their calls are about human medicine. The poison centers do not track deaths because there are too many variables. Pet owners won't always know what their animals have gotten into — they just know they are showing symptoms like lethargy, vomiting, depression, seizures or refusing food. A dog who has swallowed pills to treat ADHD will get agitated. What happens when a pet gets hold of birth control, Viagra and Rogaine pills? 'Luckily birth control pills today have very small amounts of estrogen in them. We use Viagra for dogs with pulmonary hypertension and it was originally marketed to regulate blood pressure. Rogaine can be very dangerous, especially in cats, and can cause heart failure,' Wismer said. One aspirin or one heart pill probably won't kill a pet, but a month's supply could." So, beware and be careful and if in doubt, call your vet or your poison control center immediately!



More Nabi !

