

EAST BAY TIMES

BayArea
NewsGroup

MONDAY, JUNE 4, 2018

24/7 COVERAGE ONLINE: WWW.EASTBAYTIMES.COM

Pets and Vets: The hunt for a few good dogs

How rescue dogs are selected to train as service dogs in ARF program.

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PUBLISHED: June 4, 2018 at 8:01 am

Editor's note: This is the second of a five-part series on the Pets and Vets program at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek, which matches rescue dogs with veterans, who train the dogs to be their service animals

Laramie is about to take perhaps the most important tests of her young life, but you wouldn't know it by looking at her.

The 4-year-old with golden brown eyes and a wide smile is moving from person to person, captivating hearts as she goes. Pass today and her entire life will change.

Laramie is one of scores of rescue dogs tested each year for their suitability to become service animals for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological disabilities.

Like the Marines, Danny Kimbrell and Merritt Rollins are looking for a few good dogs for Pets and Vets, the lifesaving program at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek.

Kimbrell, a Pets and Vets trainer and a veteran himself, and program manager Rollins typically test one dog a week. The dogs — all sizes, shapes and breeds — are found during frequent "rescue runs," when ARF visits Northern California shelters looking for dogs and cats for its no-kill shelter. During these visits, they keep an eye out for exceptional dogs that might be suitable for service work.

Don't expect to find only traditional rescue dogs in this program. It's the attitudes and abilities of the dogs that matter, Kimbrell says, not their breed.

Danny Kimbrell, Pets and Vets dog trainer, puts Laramie, a pit bull mix, through some tests during the evaluation process at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek. Laramie is being evaluated for a possible entry into the Pets and Vets service dog program. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

Pets and Vets candidates are placed in foster homes that replicate the vets' home situations. If the veteran has

young children or other pets, Rollins looks for a foster home with children or pets. If the dogs do well in those settings, they move on to the next step.

About 80 percent of the dogs don't make it, Rollins says. They exhibit behaviors that might be OK in a regular home, but not for the highly demanding work of a service dog. The dogs who wash out become part of ARF's "genpop" — general population. They'll eventually get a good home, just not with a vet.

"Fosters can be reluctant to admit the dog has had problems," Rollins says. "They want them to succeed, but I tell them it's



Laramie, a pit bull mix, was rescued from under a bridge in Napa. After passing her assessment testing given by Pets and Vets dog trainer Danny Kimbrell, background, she's ready to take the next step to be paired with a veteran and start service dog training. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)



Danny Kimbrell, Pets and Vets dog trainer, puts Laramie, a pit bull mix, through some tests during the evaluation process at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Friday, May 25, 2018. Laramie is being evaluated for a possible entry into the Pets and Vets service dog program. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

important that they be honest.”

And if the fosters cry when they bring the dogs back, Rollins says, she knows they've found a great dog.

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ARF executive director Elena Bicker says turning a rescue dog into a service dog has its challenges. The dogs usually have not lived under the best conditions before their rescue, and these are not dogs that were born and bred for service. But these dogs have the gift at heart, so ARF works to prepare them for the job ahead.

Laramie, a pit bull mix, was found under a bridge in Napa, huddled with her puppies. Rescue workers at the Napa shelter recognized something special in her and contacted ARF, telling Kimbrell and Rollins that they had to come see her.

At ARF, she was diagnosed with ringworm and quarantined for seven weeks, her only contact with workers dressed head to foot in medical protection garb. There was some question about how she would emerge from that confinement, but Laramie

surprised everyone.

Now, her moment of truth has arrived. Kimbrell explains that he'll be looking for certain things: “I'm looking for behavior that is right in the middle. Not too excited but not too elusive. Eager for food, but she doesn't take your hand off. Interested in what's going on around her, but not so much that she ignores her handler.”

Laramie will be graded on a scale of 1 — the top score — to 5. First up: eye contact. Kimbrell cradles her large, wide head in his hands and stares into her eyes.

“That's a 1,” Kimbrell calls, and Rollins notes the score.

Kimbrell tests for sensitivity to touch, running his hands over Laramie's body. She stands quietly before licking his hand.

Tag is next. Kimbrell taps her on her back and runs away. This is an action a child might take and Kimbrell wants to see the dog's reaction. Will she whip her head around and bare her teeth, or will she join in the play? Soon the pair are playing tug-of-war with her leash. Another 1 for Laramie.

The tests continue with paw squeezes, prey drive, sudden noises, reactions to distractions

and a food test. Kimbrell feeds her a small piece of cheese, then holds another near her mouth, leading her in a circle under his arm.

Some dogs have a fear of someone leaning over them and react badly, he says. It's an important assessment. If you have a dog, someone is always going to lean down to pet it.

Another dog, Rosie, is brought in. The greeting is friendly and the two are soon romping through the testing room, immediate best friends. That's a good sign, Kimbrell says, although with training, Laramie will learn to greet the other dog and then turn her attention back to her veteran.

Lastly, Laramie is tested on how she does on a leash. Service animals are trained to walk with a loose leash — they follow their owners' voice commands and don't pull or strain on the lead. Kimbrell says for vets with PTSD or other conditions, this test can be a deal breaker.

The No. 1 thing vets write on their forms, when asked what they don't want in a dog, is an animal that causes them problems or makes them struggle. A leash struggle is too much, Kimbrell says. It's a safety hazard, too. It can mean the difference between getting a vet out into the world or a vet becoming reclusive.

Most dogs can be trained to walk on a loose leash, but it's best to start with one already amenable to it, Kimbrell says.

Rollins takes Laramie outside, where they walk past several distractions — cars moving through a parking lot, two small dogs playing in a fenced area, bicyclists on a nearby trail and an unfortunate squirrel, dead on the sidewalk. Laramie shows interest, but she doesn't pull on the leash or get distracted.

When the scores are tallied, Laramie passes with flying colors. In a few days, she'll be paired with a veteran and begin her training.