

Georgetown pit bull Hershey, who overcame horrendous treatment at the hands of a breeder to become a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog, received an award from the Toronto Humane Society recently during the launch of Be Kind to Animals Week. Hershey and her owner Jennifer Waite have visited residents at Extencicare and the Bennett Centre in Georgetown, and are regular visitors at Martindale Gardens Retirement Community in Milton.

Photo courtesy
Torstar
News Service



THS honours pooch Pit bull ban is likely to end Hershey's stint as a therapy dog

As soon as the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog scarf is tied around her neck Hershey, a nine-year-old pit bull, knows it's time to go to work, says her owner Jennifer Waite.

"She pulls me into the building," said the Georgetown woman. And the seniors at Milton's Martindale Gardens, armed with dog treats, eagerly await their Thursday evening visits with Hershey and the other therapy dog from Georgetown—a bull mastiff named Madigan.

Hershey was recognized with a medal for her good work recently by the Toronto Humane Society during the launch of Be Kind to Animals Week, which recognizes the special bond between people and animals, and the important roles animals play in the lives of humans.

However, once the provincial pit bull ban comes into effect in August Waite said she believes Hershey likely won't be able to participate in the therapy dog program any longer.

The law will require that pit bulls be muzzled in public and Waite said therapy dogs are not permitted to wear a muzzle.

"I'm just upset for Hershey and the seniors. I think this is her calling," said Waite.

The American pit bull terrier, rescued from a breeder who never showed her love or let her out of her crate, has been a therapy dog for the past year. She's visited residents in Extencicare and the Bennett Centre in Georgetown, and is a welcome regular visitor at Milton's Martindale.

"They love it. They're down there waiting in the common room," said Waite of the residents.

Hershey laps up all the attention and often lays at the residents' feet, on her back, all four paws in the air, waiting to have her tummy rubbed.

She offers unconditional love and friendship to the residents, and according to St. John Ambulance, the dogs in the program help to restore the residents self-confidence and self-esteem, and motivate seniors to become involved. They also calm people in distress and distract them from the pain they may be suffering.

Waite had been looking for a dog to do therapy work with when she found Hershey, who was on the verge of being euthanized, at a shelter through the animal rescue organization she was volunteering with.

"I fell in love with her," said Waite after spending a day with the dog. "I was haunted by her eyes."

She said neighbours and friends were nervous when she said she was planning to bring the pit bull home, but that changed once they got to know Hershey.

"Now she's like the mascot of the street. She's very calm, very laid back."

She felt that Hershey had the perfect temperament to be a therapy dog, so she contacted St. John Ambulance. Hershey was put through a series of tests to determine her suitability—she passed—took the organization's training course which consisted of mentored visits to seniors facilities—and shortly afterward the two began their solo weekly visits.

Sandra Hall, assistant co-ordinator for St. John Ambulance Therapy Dogs Halton Hills brigade agrees Hershey in an ideal therapy dog.

"Hershey loves people," said Hall, who added that she feels Hershey knows she's working and understands she's making a difference in the lives of the people she visits.

"She has a really outgoing, sparkling personality," said Hall. She said many residents Hershey visits are surprised when they are told they are petting a pit bull.

"People react to the word, not the dog," said Hall. Hall said St. John Ambulance is lobbying to keep dogs like Hershey in the program after the ban is in effect, and she's hoping that current pit bulls in the program will be covered by a grandfathering clause.

Waite said the residents Hershey visits are also upset that Hershey may no longer be able to visit. Many of them, some who were initially frightened by the fact she's a pit bull, but now love her, worry about what's going to happen to her.

—By Lisa Tallyn,
staff writer

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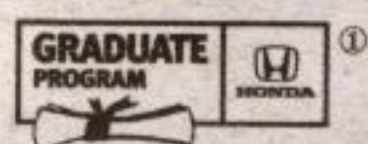
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