



familydog™

the
growth
issue

Meet
the
Bracco
Italiano

Annual Photo
Contest Winners



JULY/AUGUST 2022
\$3.95

Mrs. H. was a nursing-home resident. Alert, but no longer physically active, she chose to stay in bed, rarely leaving her room. Due to her illness, she could have nothing by mouth—food, water, and medicine traveled to her through a tube. Mrs. H. chose to keep her room dark. No lights, curtains closed. The staff would turn on a lamp as needed, but for years, visitors became accustomed to a room that always felt like midnight.

Then one day a visitor asked Mrs. H. if she liked dogs. “Yes! I used to have one.” The visitor explained that a dog was in the hallway and could enter the room if that was OK. It was OK. Lutheran Church Charities K-9 Comfort Dog Sheba, a perfectly groomed and leashed Golden Retriever, walked quietly to the bed with her handler. Brief introductions were made while Sheba sat silently. Then, on the command of *rise*, Sheba gently placed her two front paws on the edge of the mattress. Mrs. H. beamed and touched the dog’s soft head. “Turn on that ceiling light,” she ordered her visitor. “I need to see this dog better.”

Since 2016, thousands of children, teens, and adults have said that Sheba has made *their* lives better. She wears a vest with large letters: *Please Pet Me*. The first time that people touch



Sheba is not asleep—she is comforting students at Union High School in Union, Missouri, following the death of a student. Sheba often visits counselors’ offices or libraries when meeting small groups of students.

Golden Moments

Sheba transforms a church’s outreach ministry.

Sheba, the same comments tumble out: “Where did you get Sheba?” or “I wish *my* dog acted like this.” This special dog is owned by Immanuel Lutheran Church and School in Washington, Missouri, a small city of 14,000 west of St. Louis.

“Sheba is not a church pet,” emphasizes church staff member Deaconess Kelly Hardt. “Nor is she a therapy dog or service dog. Sheba is a highly trained working dog who brings comfort to people. She is a ministry of our church.”

“ ... MANY PARTS, BUT ONE BODY.”

Hardt had been on the church staff just a few weeks before floating the idea of obtaining a Comfort Dog from Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) in Chicago. She quickly found



Lutheran Church Charities designates titles for all persons who work with the Comfort Dogs. Deaconess Kelly Hardt (left) is the Top Dog, Handler, and Secondary Caregiver. Susie Blatt is a Handler, retired Top Dog, and former lay chairman of the committee that acquired Sheba for the church. The Top Dog plans Sheba's daily working schedule.

county where Sheba lives received just two weeks of intensive training after being acquired. Both Immanuel Lutheran and Franklin County Sheriff's Office continue to train their dogs on a regular basis.)

Sheba gradually began making public appearances with her handlers, who are church members and volunteers. Rich Ulsas, who has been a handler since day one, appreciates the training he received in Chicago, where he learned—with an LCC K-9 Comfort Dog—how to be most effective when visiting hospital patients. “I have a heart

an ally in the congregation. Susie Blatt, longtime dog owner and board president of the county's humane society, agreed to speak at congregational meetings and assist with fundraising. Within a year, the congregation had raised the funds needed plus extra money for food, grooming, and future medical care.

Once the fees for the dog were paid, LCC K-9 Comfort Dog Ministry began the lengthy process of interviews. The dog would need a permanent home, and several dependable handlers who would be trained by the national ministry. “Kelly and I spent time in Chicago even before

Sheba was placed with us,” Blatt says. “Eventually, our church sent nine of us to Chicago for three days to meet Sheba and be trained as handlers.”

Wilma Adams remembers the experience. “The training was quite strenuous. One day, we each were assigned a dog to train for an hour or so, and then we each switched to a different dog. They were all under age 2. Finally, it was announced that Sheba would be our dog, so we worked with her. *She* knew the commands—we were learning them!”

By the time Sheba arrived in Washington at 15 months, she'd had 2,000

hours of training by LCC. (By contrast, two police dogs recently purchased by the sheriff's office in the



Cute and cuddly as a puppy, Sheba endeared herself to the trainers at Lutheran Church Charities, not for her adorable features but for her willingness to learn and be obedient.

TOP: ANEETA BROWN; BOTTOM: LUTHERAN CHURCH CHARITIES

HEROES & HELPERS

for older people, and Sheba helps draw out their stories when we visit nursing homes and veterans homes. Often I'll do Bible devotions with the residents."

Another blessing is when Sheba meets the nurses—caregivers need comfort, too. The nurses usually ask, "When can you come back?" Ulsas and Sheba also visit a residential day-care center for persons with developmental disabilities. "At first, many of them wouldn't even look at Sheba," he says. "They were afraid of dogs. Gradually, they warmed up to Sheba's quiet and gentle manner and now many of them like to pet her."

Sheba's willingness to be petted by anyone of any age, under the watchful eye of the handler, is a large part of her appeal. "You can't have a church dog that doesn't like children," Hardt explains. "Golden Retrievers love people of all ages and that's one reason Lutheran Church Charities picked this breed to train."

Strangers who would normally not even make eye contact with another adult in a dentist's office, for example, engage in conversation when a gorgeous Golden Retriever sits regally in a waiting room. "I was on my way out of a dental appointment after a stressful day with my child, and a woman asked me about Sheba," recalls handler Angie Hamlyn. "Pretty soon she was telling me about her difficult life and how she



To demonstrate how Sheba can put her paws on a hospital bed, handler Sally Mades, right, gives the command rise. The fifth-grade class at Immanuel Lutheran School enjoyed a visit from Sheba.

was trying to get a job. So I said a silent prayer on my way to the car. A couple days later, the woman left a nice comment about Sheba on Sheba's Facebook page and said she'd just gotten a job."

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Sheba visits a facility or event only if she's invited, and she always wears her vest when she's working. Because Sheba is so well-mannered, she's welcome at schools, hospitals, assisted living facilities, camps, bicycle rodeos, service clubs, YMCA facilities, churches, police stations, Special Olympics, various retail stores, and even funerals. If the host wants Sheba in a group photo, the handler gives a one-word command and Sheba will position herself in front

of the group and face the photographer. "She knows

at least 20 commands," says handler Jenn Hallien, "and we all use the same words for each command so there's no confusion. About once a month, all the handlers meet with Sheba as a group for refresher training. If one handler is absent, Sheba notices and moves around the room looking for that person."

Even children are impressed with Sheba's good manners. When handler Sally Mades recently introduced Sheba to a class of fifth graders, she mentioned



When Sheba is working, she always wears her nylon vest, which identifies her as a Comfort Dog from Lutheran Church Charities. Her name is in bold letters.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE: ANEETA BROWN

HEROES & HELPERS

that Sheba was trained to not bark, jump, or lick people. “If people are feeling sad and needing comfort, they don’t want to be near to a barking, jumping dog. The handlers have to protect Sheba when she’s working. We make sure no one’s stepping on her tail or that too many people crowd around her. She trusts us.”

In times of crisis, Sheba demonstrates her greatest asset—listening. In 2018, she boarded an airplane with handlers Blatt and Adams for a trip to Parkland, Florida, where 17 people had been killed in their high school. For one week, Sheba and 18 other LCC K-9 Comfort Dogs from around the nation absorbed some of the public’s grief by letting hundreds of tearful people

pet and hug them. “A young teenage girl saw Sheba in a park that had become a gathering place for grieving,” remembers Blatt. “The girl knelt on the grass, petted Sheba, and talked softly with her friend about what had happened at the school. I later learned that until the girl’s experience with Sheba, she had been so traumatized by the shootings that she hadn’t spoken one word about the shooting to her family.” During her six years in Washington, Sheba has comforted students close to home after the deaths of students by drowning, suicide, illness, and car accidents.

The Rev. Dr. Mark Bangert, who has been the pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church for 30 years,



“Hi Sheba! Bye Sheba!” Students at Immanuel Lutheran School love greeting Sheba before morning classes begin.

strongly supports both the Comfort Dog ministry and the volunteers who manage it. “Sheba requires care and attention 24 hours a day, so the time commitment from our volunteers is not a small thing,” he says. “Our handlers engage with people in difficult circumstances, but the handlers see the impact of Sheba’s ministry and that empowers them to make the time commitment. Sheba is also a regular and calming presence in our church office.” Sheba attends many of Immanuel’s Sunday worship services every year.

When Sheba is not working, she is at home, living with caregiver and handler Adams, a retired widow. “I take off her vest, look at the handler’s log of what she did during the day, and then Sheba starts playing. She gets to be a regular dog. I will often pick up a toy, show it to

her, and hide it. Then I give the command *find*. She’ll go into every room in my house, and usually finds the toy in a couple of minutes.”

All the handlers are diligent in monitoring Sheba’s need for relaxing between scheduled appointments. During COVID, Sheba (now age 7) had very little public contact. The handlers agree that long rest was good for her.

Over the years, hundreds of people have wanted to adopt Sheba, but the answer is always no. She will never be for sale. To the 1,232 members of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Sheba belongs to them and her ministry is priceless. **FD**

Aneeta Brown, of Washington, Missouri, is a widely published freelance writer whose work has appeared in many regional and national publications.



Dogs With Business Cards

Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) provides business cards to every active Comfort Dog. The card features the dog’s photo, a Scripture, and contact information. LCC trains only purebred Golden Retrievers for its Comfort Dog ministry. The Comfort Dogs open doors for conversation about faith and create opportunities to share the mercy and compassion of Jesus Christ. Visit lutheranchurchcharities.org to see photos and locations of all active dogs.