

People & Places

Unsung Heroes

Providing hounds for nation's heroes

BY JENNIFER SHAPIRO-SACKS
Special Correspondent

Name: Carolee Ellison
Age: 44
Residence: Lake Worth
Birthplace: Hackensack, N.J.

Family: Husband, Dave Ellison; son, Bren Ellison, 12

Career: Veterinary assisting teacher at South Tech Academy

Organization: Awesome Greyhound Adoptions is a Boynton Beach-based non-profit, no-kill group that finds homes for retired racing greyhounds. The Hounds & Heroes Program helps place the dogs as pets, therapy dogs or fully trained service dogs for veterans.

How long have you been volunteering there?

About six months.

Why do you volunteer?

I am able to combine my love for dog training with my respect and gratitude to our veterans to benefit everyone.

Why did you choose this organization?

I have known Barbara Masi, the founder, for eight years. She is very knowledgeable about greyhounds, as well as organizations that help others. Anything she is involved in, I want to help as well.

Describe your volunteer role.

I foster and train the greyhounds to service the veteran's individual needs.

What are your goals when you volunteer?

To have every moment be a learning experience — whether I am specifically training a command or having the dogs experience life as a service dog.

What challenges have you faced?

Greyhounds are unlike other breeds I have trained. They are very unique in how they process things and what they need to be taught. Coming off of the racetrack, they need to learn basic procedures — walking on a leash,



SUBMITTED PHOTO

From left are Robert Michael Keefe Jr. (with Rocky), Carolee Ellison (Sherlock) and Rob Reagan (Buff).

how to climb/descend stairs, etc. It is a challenge but makes each dog unique and interesting.

What does your organization need?

Money. Being a nonprofit, volunteer-based organization, we are always in need of funds. However, we also need people to foster the greyhounds until they can be put into the training program (or adopted out if they are not chosen for Hounds & Heroes). We would also like to get the word out that this organization is available to veterans that need a service dog — greyhounds are especially suited since they are a larger dog (for mobility assistance) and very mellow.

Is there a moment that stands out that made you think, "This is why I volunteer?"

There was a veteran that had mobility problems as well as PTSD. He had been in the Vietnam War, was a lawyer, a priest, worked with the Palm Beach Sheriff's Office and had a regal bearing to him. The first time he saw his service dog, he became like a child — his mouth dropped open, and he (carefully and painfully) lowered himself to the floor to be able to connect with "his" dog. After a few

moments of happy introductions, he got very still, laid his hands on the dog and just absorbed the peace from him. That was the first (of many) moments that I said, "This is why."

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I am so very grateful for everyone who is touched by this program: myself, my family and my students are instrumental in training the dogs; the veterans, without whose sacrifice we wouldn't be able to enjoy our freedom; the fosters, program volunteers, etc. who help keep this vital service available to help others; and the public — their interest and excitement about the program is infectious and helps to remind me that there are people who still care in this world.

For more information, visit Awesomgreyhoundadoptions.org or call 561-737-1941.

If you know a Palm Beach County resident who deserves recognition for volunteer work, email the information to tan90210@aol.com. Nominations should include volunteer's name, city of residence, a contact name and phone number, and a brief description of why this person deserves special recognition.