

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX: INLAND REGIONAL CENTER'S NEW 'THERAPIST'

If you have visited the Inland Regional Center lately, you may have seen a new staff member that doesn't quite look like she belongs. Her name is Blessed. She is a very small golden retriever, and the newest member of Clinic Team. Providing animal-assisted therapy at IRC was the brainchild of IRC's occupational therapist, Annette Richardson. The idea met with enthusiastic approval from our Director. Annette had been pursuing a therapy dog for several months when she chanced upon the Canine Support Team facility during field visits. It took persistence, but Annette finally contacted the CEO of Canine Support Team, Inc., and an application was submitted. She met with the head trainer in March, and was scheduled to receive a dog in July. Then, four days before an April training, Annette was called to participate. She was told that a dog was waiting for her!



Blessed has trained for this position for almost 2 years under the supervision of Canine Support Teams, Inc. First, she lived 6 months with a puppy trainer who took her every place imaginable. After all, service dogs have to be very worldly canines. She then spent the next 12 months in the California Institution for Women in Chino where she was trained by a specially chosen inmate under CST's supervision. Her training concluded at the Canine Support Team facility in Menifee where her skills were refined. Blessed then 'team trained' with her new owner, Annette. Dogs need a leader, and if they don't have one, they attempt to assume that position. With great skill, the trainers at Canine Support Team, Inc. transfer leadership of the dogs to their new owners, and teams are formed. The team must be competent enough to pass the public access test, and then they are on their way.

Blessed is a very smart dog. She knows 40 commands. She can turn on lights, open and close doors, pick up and

Team
Training



retrieve items, and even place them where you ask her to. But what makes her special, as far as the people who work with her are concerned, is her personality. Although she is a crazy puppy at home - running figure eights in the backyard, throwing toys over her head, and barking - at work she is all business. Blessed is gentle and very intuitive. When asked to approach a child or adult, she knows whether she should proceed calmly, playfully, or coyly.

In the short time that Blessed has been working at the



agency, she has touched many families. She visited the home of a little boy who had never had the opportunity to see, much less pet a dog, as his medical condition had confined him to home and the hospital. She has helped decrease the fear of a child having her blood drawn. She has motivated a little boy to use his first sign, "dog". She has made wheelchairs seem less scary to clients by jumping up on them herself. She has helped parents to identify their children's strengths and deficits. She has made clinic feel less like a doctor's office. She has relaxed anxious parents who have visited too many doctors' offices over too short a period of time. She has been a distraction for those waiting for intake or evaluation. Even when walking in the parking lot, she has taken it upon herself to be the agency greeter. She has become an invaluable part of therapy staff. Blessed does not see disability, only a new friendly face - an opportunity for a pet and maybe even a game of fetch. She defines what it means to be "man's best friend."



When you see the leash on my nose, I am working!