

# Born to Serve

by Jennifer Clemens

Putting the “Can” in “Canines” is a labor of love for these local service dog puppy raisers

Imagine the joy of adopting a new puppy. Then picture devoting yourself to giving it love, teaching it commands, and taking it with you almost everywhere you go for an entire year. When those 12 months are up, you then bid a bittersweet farewell to the companion that has become part of your family, but you take comfort knowing it will be a fully trained service dog for a person in need. As service dog puppy raisers, Wendy and Tim Hartman and their family have taken on this labor of love not once, not twice, but five times.

It was the Hartmans’ daughter, Nickie, who sparked their interest in becoming puppy raisers for New Horizons Service Dogs back in 2009. Nickie, a Lake Mary High School graduate from the Class of 2012, was looking for a community service opportunity when she saw a New Horizons service dog aiding a woman in a wheelchair. At first, though, Wendy admits she and Tim weren’t convinced about the idea of adding to their canine family.

“I knew it would break my heart to give them away,” says Wendy. “But my daughter said, ‘How can you not do this? Look at how many people you’d be helping.’”

Before they knew it, the Hartmans had become the proud new puppy raisers of a golden retriever, Kanga. Since that time, they also have raised Bordeaux, Brooklyn, Titan, and now Nova.

“We’ve had a different relationship with every dog,” says Wendy.

It was Titan who became the family’s “rock” and a regular visitor at the hospital when both Wendy’s mother and Tim were patients. When Titan’s time with the Hartmans overlapped a few weeks with their current service dog, Nova, Titan decided to become the trainer and taught Nova some household etiquette basics.

Teaching seems to be a recurring theme in the Hartman household. If you’ve had a student at Greenwood Lakes Middle School, you may recognize Wendy. She has taught language arts at the school for 9 of her 17 years with Seminole County



▲ Wendy and Nova at a local restaurant, one of the many places Wendy takes her service dogs-in-training.

Public Schools. Wendy’s older daughter, Brittany, graduated from Lake Mary High School in 2010 and now teaches at Woodlands Elementary.

The summer break each school year has become Wendy’s perfect time to devote herself to her next puppy-raising assignment. At eight weeks of age, a New Horizons puppy begins phase one of the training program. That’s when a family like the Hartmans is matched with the dog they will socialize and train for the upcoming year. The goal is to expose the dog to as many situations as possible. Wendy has taken the family’s dogs-in-training everywhere with her – the grocery store, church services, parades, school volleyball games, SunRail, plane trips, and even a recent wedding reception that was well-attended by other service dogs.

At home, the dog is free to play and just hang out with the Hartman family and their other pets. However, once the dog goes out in public, it’s time to work. Wendy never ceases to be amazed by how intuitively the dogs switch gears when she gives the command, “Get dressed.”

“I just love that I get to educate people about these amazing dogs!”

– Wendy Hartman

How it all begins: Nova as an eight-week-old puppy begins his training.

Nova is all smiles as he sits proudly by the New Horizons Service Dogs table at a public event.



“You put that service vest on them and they know to behave,” says Wendy, who is thrilled that being a puppy raiser combines many of her favorite things: people, dogs, and helping others. “I just love that I get to educate people about these amazing dogs!”

One of the main lessons Wendy shares is how to act around a service dog. Although it’s very tempting to pet these beautiful animals, Wendy explains, “You should always ask before touching or talking to a service dog because it is doing a job and should not be distracted.”

And what a job it is. These impressive dogs are not just companions to their eventual owners, but they allow people with disabilities to become more independent. They perform tasks such as picking up keys or other items that fall to the ground, bringing a laundry basket to within reach, placing clothes in and out of the washer and dryer, and even opening refrigerator doors and retrieving items from within. For children with autism, the dogs can respond to the command “blanket” and provide a source of calm. Wendy has seen firsthand the difference they can make in someone’s life.

“They just love to be with their owners,” she says. “They are happy dogs who love to serve!”