Thanks to the support of current and former Seminole County educators, New Horizons Service Dogs is changing the lives of local men, women, and children with disabilities.

Wendy Hartman became a puppy raiser for New Horizons Service Dogs about a decade ago, when one of her children needed community service hours for high school. “It just snowballed from there,” says Wendy, a Lake Mary resident who recently picked up her 22nd service dog-in-training.

To say Wendy is passionate about being a puppy raiser for New Horizons would be an understatement. This past summer, she left a 23-year career with Seminole County Public Schools to become the nonprofit organization’s assistant director. Founded in 1995, New Horizons breeds and trains service dogs to assist people with disabilities.

“I love the puppies, the big dogs, what our program does, what our mission is,” Wendy says. “I just enjoy the dogs and the people that I get to meet.”

Her enthusiasm is so contagious that Wendy has inspired about a half-dozen other Seminole County educators to become puppy raisers and breeder caretakers.

New Horizons, based in Orange City, works with golden retrievers and Labrador retrievers. At eight weeks of age, the pups are placed with volunteer puppy raisers who are responsible for basic obedience training and socialization. The dogs receive additional training from prison inmates and expert trainers. By the end of their training, which typically lasts two to two-and-a-half years, these smart, eager-to-please dogs know about 80 commands, from turning light switches on and off to retrieving items from the refrigerator.

Most of the New Horizons dogs are matched with adults and children in wheelchairs. The organization also has specialized programs for autistic children, wounded war veterans, and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The dogs, which cost between $25,000 and $30,000 to raise, are provided free to qualified clients who live in Florida.

“This is an extremely rewarding experience. “Diver’s social life is top-notch,” Kristie says. “He goes to many events that not only help him learn more, but also help spread the word about the good work that New Horizons does. We have seen how the pups change people’s lives. We will be sad when we say goodbye to Diver, but we know what an important job each dog has in store. It is so wonderful to be part of their journey.”

“Diver” is the name of the service dog that Jon Viera of Sanford has owned for New Horizons several months ago. She and her husband are raising Diver, a golden retriever, and have found it to be an extremely rewarding experience.

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A group of current and former Seminole County public school educators are raising puppies and caring for breeder dogs on behalf of New Horizons Service Dogs. The nonprofit organization provides service dogs to people with disabilities.

Front row: Kristie Seitz and Diver, Danielle Uddin and Zen, and Margot Blythe and Scarb. Back row: Laura Barnett and Diver, Ashley Chaires and Beta, and Wendy Hartman with Divorce and Quinn.

To learn more, visit NewHorizonsServiceDogs.org.