



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 Tank, and Megan Betche and Scuba. Back row: Laura Barnett and Owen, Ashley Chaires and Tetris, and Wendy Hartman with Dinozzo and Quinn.

# CANINE CLASS

## IS IN SESSION

by Jill Duff-Hoppes

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.

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– Laura Barnett

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.

### THE ROOKIE TEACHER

Kristie Seitz, Seminole County’s science curriculum specialist for elementary and middle schools, became a first-time puppy raiser

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.

“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.”

### TEAM TEACHING

During Laura Barnett’s first stint as a puppy share raiser for New Horizons, her primary goal was to avoid undoing what the pup had already learned.

“I didn’t want to mess him up,” says Laura, a secondary science teacher at Greenwood Lakes Middle School.

Wendy Hartman, who was also a teacher at Greenwood Lakes at the time, had been searching for someone to team up with her to co-raise a golden retriever pup named Fender. Laura, who had

observed Wendy working with New Horizons service dogs-in-training for years, raised her hand to help.

“Laura is a quick study,” Wendy says. “What’s nice about share-raising is the dog gets two very different experiences, which helps to create more well-rounded service pups.”

The women enjoyed co-raising so much that they didn’t stop, not even when Wendy left Greenwood Lakes to become assistant director of New Horizons. This past summer, Laura and Wendy had the satisfaction of seeing Fender placed with a girl who has cerebral palsy. And, a couple of months ago, they picked up their 14th puppy to co-raise – a black Labrador retriever named Tank. Typically, they co-raise two or three dogs at once, with the blessings of their supportive families.

“Like teaching, puppy raising allows me to make a positive difference in someone’s life, but I don’t have to wait 20 years to see the results,” Laura says. “When I see the transformations that these dogs provide in the quality of life of their person, it feeds my soul.”

### HOW THE DOGS HELP

#### A COMIC BOOK SUPERHERO

When Jon Viera’s first service dog, Hollywood, died of cancer about a year ago, he was devastated.

“Hollywood was my mobility dog,” says Jon, who has spinal muscular atrophy and uses a wheelchair. “She was my arms and my best friend. She was an integral part of my life.” Fortunately, New Horizons – which originally matched Jon with Hollywood – was able to find another service dog for him in record time. Nehi, his current dog, is just as skilled and hardworking as Hollywood, but their personalities couldn’t be more different. True to her name, Hollywood had a *big star* persona, while Nehi is a laid-back, *chill* dog.

Both have been invaluable to Jon at work and home. The 38-year-old lives in Sanford with his wife Emily; their son Nick, who attends Seminole High School; and three other dogs. Last year, Jon – a self-described “goofy, nerdy guy” – became a co-owner of a comic and games shop at the Oviedo Mall. The super-loyal Nehi accompanies his handler to the store, where the dog opens doors and carries Jon’s lunch bag, among other duties.

Jon and Emily are so grateful for what New Horizons has brought to their lives that they volunteered as puppy raisers for a few years, so others could reap the benefits of a service dog.

“I’m very much an advocate of doing whatever it takes to be independent,” Jon says.

#### POOCH’S PERCEPTION

At first, Jim Myers wasn’t convinced he needed a service dog, but now that he has one, the Lake Mary man can’t imagine life without his canine helper.

“He took to me right away,” says Jim, who has Parkinson’s plus syndrome, fibromyalgia, and spinal disc problems. “I could not

give him up now, because we’re so attached. I would be heartbroken.”

On good days, Jim can walk short distances but otherwise uses a wheelchair. The 55-year-old, who suffers from debilitating pain, also struggles with memory and balance problems. It was Jim’s wife, Denise, who suggested a service dog when her husband’s condition began to progress. The couple’s research led them to New Horizons, which matched Jim with a golden retriever named Rollins about a year-and-a-half ago.

Rollins accompanies Jim and Denise everywhere, from church services to restaurants to vacations. The devoted dog assists with a myriad of tasks, such as removing Jim’s socks, pulling his wheelchair, picking up clothes from the floor, and opening and closing cabinets and doors. The dog seems to sense when Jim is about to fall and nudges him to sit down. And, when his handler’s physical pain is at its worst, the canine provides comfort by lying right beside him.

“Rollins seems to pick up on my feelings and emotions now,” Jim says, “He has become a very good companion.”



Jon Viera of Sanford with Nehi, his second service dog



Jim Myers of Lake Mary with Rollins, his first service dog

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