

Four legs healing broken hearts



Cassie, a courthouse service dog, is trained to put children and their families at ease in stressful situations. She's one of four courthouse dogs in the state. (Jim Thompson/Journal)

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Cassie, a two-year-old black Labrador retriever, specializes in healing broken hearts and taming trauma.

One mother, whose 9-year-old daughter is in the custody of the state's Children, Youth and Families Department in Albuquerque, says Cassie helps the whole family during their supervised visits, an emotionally traumatic time. Her little girl just wants to go home but, for undisclosed reasons, can't for now, although her mother is working to regain custody.

"At first she cried," the mother said of when she has to leave her daughter. "Then we'd say, 'let's go find Cassie,' and it cheered her up. Cassie is a lovable dog."

One of four trained courthouse dogs in New Mexico, Cassie is Bernalillo County's first. She spends her time at the courthouse attending children's hearings and at CYFD, offering comfort to children and others who need her.

Lisa Madrid-Schleicher, metro regional manager of CYFD protective services, is one of Cassie's handlers. She said Cassie helps make tough times easier for children, adult family members and the staff.

Many children who have been put into the state's protective custody don't understand why they can't go home, Madrid-Schleicher said. Often they sob uncontrollably for hours after their parent or other family members leave.

“Cassie is beneficial for families, staff and foster parents,” she said. “Her presence decompresses everyone. She makes stressful situations better. She’s oblivious to the chaos. She just loves everyone.”

Cassie, hearing her name, sighs and nuzzles the 9-year-old’s mother who sits on the floor next to her. Then Cassie rolls over for a little tummy rub.

Of course, Cassie has a few entertaining tricks in her repertoire. She’s willing to be dressed in a tutu and angel wings. She plays piano – a few notes anyway – and, true to her breeding, she will return anything that humans toss her way, from squeaky chipmunks to tugging ropes.

Veronica Montañó-Pilch, executive director of CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children, in Albuquerque, is Cassie’s primary handler. “Cassie is a great comfort to everyone in the courtroom. She’s a nice way to bring everyone into a conversation. People touch her and they start talking.”



About CASA

Since 1985, the Albuquerque Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children, or CASA, a nonprofit program created by court order, has provided volunteers for children who have experienced trauma from abuse and/or neglect. They make sure children are safe and their needs are met as they go into the system until they find a safe and permanent home. For the past 26 years, more than 1,150 community members have been trained to advocate for the safety of more than 12,000 children.

One of Cassie’s jobs is to comfort children, their families and courtroom professionals. Presiding Children’s Court Judge John J. Romero and Veronica Montañó-Pilch, CASA director and Cassie’s main handler, say the two-year-old Lab excels at defusing stressful situations. (Jim Thompson/Journal)

Presiding Children’s Court Judge John J. Romero agrees, adding that animals have a different wisdom from humans. Cassie brings that to his courtroom, keeping what goes on very real and down to earth.

“They’re smarter than we give them credit for,” he said. “They remind us to keep it simple and smart. She uncomplicates things.”

In the courtroom, Cassie often lies at the feet of a child who must testify, Montañó-Pilch said.

She wrote a grant for Cassie, whose adoption fee of \$6,000 was less than half of her actual cost. The dog came to live with Montañó-Pilch and work in children’s court and CYFD several months ago.

A purpose-bred dog

Trained at Assistance Dogs of the West in Santa Fe for 18 months, Cassie comes from a long line of exceptional Labs, said Linda Milanese, the nonprofit’s director.

“She’s a purpose-bred dog. We have wonderful, generous breeders. We have the benefit of 75 years of genetic information from champion lines.”

The organization also trains other types of service dogs, including those that help clients overcome physical mobility and emotional challenges, and others that alert and respond to the needs of clients with seizure disorders. Mental health assistance dogs and social therapy dogs help clients live more fully in society.

Most of the dogs are Labs or golden retrievers, or a mix of the two breeds. They make great service dogs because of their innate desire to retrieve objects for humans. Sometimes, the organization trains rescue dogs or even people’s own dogs if they exhibit certain personality traits that make them good candidates, she says.

Those traits for courthouse dogs include low body movement, meaning they don’t run around and jump everywhere, quick recovery time and biddability, or the desire to respond to the wishes of many people, she says. They also have to bond easily to humans and have a low prey drive, so that if they see a rabbit they don’t make a mad dash away from their human partner, she adds.

Service dogs also have to be in excellent health without joint problems or disease. They work about four hours at a time and have a career of about 10 years, she says. Since 1995 the organization has trained about 100 dogs.

Superhero in a vest

Scientific studies bear out what humans have known since they shared homes with canines in prehistoric caves, Milanese says: Dogs help humans be better people.

A 2012 review of 69 scientific studies, published in “Frontiers in Psychology,” found that human and animal interaction lowers stress hormones like cortisol, lowers heart rate and blood pressure, improves cardiovascular health, and boosts physical and mental health in general. Animal and human interaction also lowers self-reported anxiety and fear.

Milanese says research suggests the physical, emotional and mental benefits of dog and human interaction is triggered by a release of oxytocin, a human hormone that fosters feelings of bonding and connection. Having a dog around during a traumatic situation, like testifying in court or during a physical examination, can change the way the body processes the event, reducing future emotional problems surrounding it, she said.

“We know courthouse dogs are effective, because everywhere we have placed a courthouse dog, we are asked for a second dog within a year,” she said.



Veronica Montañó-Pilch, left, executive director of CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children) in Albuquerque, and Lisa Madrid-Schleicher, metro regional manager of CYFD Protective Services, sit with Cassie outside CYFD at the end of February. (Jim Thompson/Journal)

Montañó-Pilch agrees, adding she’s raising funds for a second dog for Bernalillo County.

While Cassie may be a superhero while she wears her vest, when she takes it off, signaling a release from work, she’s just a happy puppy.

“As soon as we take her vest off, she runs around the house,” she said, adding Cassie likes to play with her sons, 14 and 21, and her family dog, Lizzie, 12. “Cassie’s just a big puppy when she’s not working.”