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Ready to Serve

Language isn't barrier for canine comforter

By MELISSA TANJI, Staff Writer

POSTED: November 19, 2009

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"Osuwari," which means "down," and "nenne," or "to go to sleep," are two of the more than 20 Japanese commands that Maui golden retriever Bailey understands.

The fluffy, mellow 2-year-old, who was trained at Hawaii Canines for Independence in Makawao, will soon spread his aloha while working full time at a children's hospital in Japan.

This is the first dog from Hawaii Canines that will be sent out of state, said Mo Maurer, one of the organization's founders. The nonprofit group trains highly skilled service dogs to assist individuals with physical disabilities.

"We are so excited to have this opportunity to help the children there," she said.

Through a partnership among Hawaii Canines, the Tyler Foundation, Shizuoka Children's Hospital and Kapiolani Medical Center for Women & Children, Bailey will make his way to Japan on Saturday with handler and pediatric nurse Yuko Morita, who is from Japan.

For the past week, Bailey along with Morita and Kim Forsythe, president of the Tyler Foundation, have been attending HCI's Team Training Camp in Makawao.

On Monday, Bailey refined his patient skills, which he will use to support children as they go through painful medical treatments. At times, this means merely putting his head on a child's lap.

The service dog has been in training for two years and has passed health and temperament screenings. One might say he's bilingual; he understands 70 commands in English to go along with his Japanese repertoire.

Maurer said most dogs are not suited to work in a hospital because of the stressful environment that may include unfamiliar smells, noises and diverse emotions of patients.

"It can really stress a dog out," she said.

At Kapiolani Medical Center for Women & Children on Oahu, where HCI donated a dog named Tucker for a similar program, Bailey stayed collected and passed his exams.

"He has a very calm demeanor," Maurer said. "He loves children. He'll lie with a sick child and put his head on their laps and stay there all day with them, which is really unique."

At Shizuoka Children's Hospital, about 100 miles south of Tokyo, Bailey will spend five days a week visiting his young patients. He will sit with children while they are having chemotherapy treatment.

"It really distracts them from the IV and the medicine. It makes a difference having the dog there," Maurer said.

Bailey also will help with physical therapy and has a special harness that a child can hold on to while trying to walk.

Maurer said it didn't take Bailey long to learn the Japanese commands. With the right tones, he was able to grasp what handlers were saying.

"He learned them faster than I did," Maurer said with a laugh. "I had to write them on my hand."

Forsythe, an American citizen who has lived in Japan for 20 years, said the program is unique in Japan. Other animal programs she has seen there consist only of people bringing pets to hospitals once a month for short visits.

"A lot of what we are doing is really new," she said.

The Tyler Foundation is helping fund the training and the cost of bringing Bailey to Japan. Although organizers did not want to disclose costs, Forsythe said the foundation has made a "sizable donation" to HCI.

The foundation also is subsidizing Morita's salary to handle Bailey full time.

Forsythe and her husband, Mark Ferris, founded the Tyler Foundation after their son, Tyler, died from

Article Photos



Yuko Morita, pediatric nurse and therapy dog handler, and Jeweliana Gadiant, 8, of Kihei help dog Bailey (left) work on his children skills Monday morning at Hawaii Canines for Independence in Makawao. Also pictured is service dog Grace, who is in training to help Jeweliana. Morita will be Bailey's handler at the Shizuoka Children's Hospital in Japan. The Maui News / AMANDA COWAN photo

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infant leukemia before he turned 2 about four years ago.

The foundation, funded by private and corporate donors, is dedicated to making life better for children who have cancer in Japan and their families. Programs include counseling and support programs and the Shine On! House, a gathering place for social and fun activities for the children and their families.

Forsythe combed Japan and the world for a program like HCI but didn't find one until visiting Kapiolani Medical Center and seeing Tucker in action.

This past summer, Forsythe hooked up with Maurer. Maurer said Bailey was being trained to work at a Shriners hospital, but the facility wasn't ready for him. So when Forsythe approached HCI, there was an available canine for the job.

Bailey left Wednesday for more training at Kapiolani Medical Center, where he will visit with the therapy dog team, Dr. Wendi Hirsch and Tucker. He will receive more training in Japan with assistance from an HCI member.

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