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'Aragon' – truly 'an angel with fur'

Grief-therapy dog helps ease the pain

Dog at work

Aragon, a golden lab/yellow retriever mixed-breed dog, relaxes with Pam Turner of Turner Funeral Home. Aragon is trained to interact with people as a grief-counseling dog.

(Ledger photo by Eric Poole)



By ERIC POOLE

Ledger staff writer

The woman was inconsolable.

Sitting in Turner Funeral Home last month after the death of a close relative, she sobbed uncontrollably until a specially-trained staff member at the funeral home was sent over to offer support.

"About three minutes later, she stopped crying. After about two more minutes, she was smiling," says Dave Reynolds, who works at the funeral home, in Ellwood City.

It has been a little more than a month since Aragon, a golden retriever/yellow lab mixed-breed dog became Turner Funeral Home's newest – and furriest – grief counselor.

Aragon's handler Pam Turner, of the funeral home, says there is no arguing with the effect he has had on people.

"I can't tell you all the positive feedback I've gotten," she says. "A lot of people have come over and said, 'I feel so much better.'

"In their faces, you can tell he has had a calming effect on people."

Aragon was trained by Canine Companions for Independence, a non-profit organization that trains work dogs to assist the hearing- and mobility-impaired. The organization also has a facility dog program, which includes grief dogs.

Aragon is believed to be Lawrence County's first grief dog. A funeral home in Mercer County also has a dog that fulfills similar duties, says Turner.

In Turner's estimation, Aragon has been everything she hoped he would be, and then some. At one recent funeral, the visitors included a large group of high-school-age youths.

"They had a rough time," Turner says. "But each one, when they began to hug him, they were better able to

cope with being in a funeral home."

Aragon is coping quite well himself with being in a funeral home. But then, that's what he was trained for.

He has been preparing for this work almost since his birth in California some two years ago. After being screened for attributes such as intelligence and non-aggressive behavior, at the age of eight weeks he was shipped off to a puppy raiser for 14 months of initial training on basic commands. He now immediately understands and responds to some 35 commands.

After that, it was off to the Canine Companions for Independence training center for another six months of specialized training. For Aragon, that meant facility dog instruction to help him learn how to interact with people.

The program is designed not only to train the dogs, but also to weed out unsuitable dogs. Those who drop out of the training are given away as pets.

In fact, there is a five-year waiting list for those who want the rejected, but well-trained, dogs.

The process is almost as demanding – and even longer – for the humans as it is for the dogs. It was nearly three years from the time Turner requested a grief dog until September, when Aragon arrived at the funeral home.

Turner first became interested in getting a grief dog after seeing one at a funeral director's convention.

"I love animals," she says. "Whenever I see one, I have to go look at it – dogs, pigs, cats, it doesn't matter."

Soon after that, she discussed the matter with her husband, Ken, and began the process by filling out an application. Then, there was a telephone interview and a questionnaire before she was accepted into the program.

On the week of Sept. 20, she went to the Canine Companions for Independence training center in Delaware. Even then, there was no guarantee Turner would take a dog with her when she left.

"They watched how we worked with each dog," she says. "I kept thinking, 'what if I don't get a dog?'"

When she wasn't worried about leaving the training center empty-handed, Turner was hoping to get a golden retriever. She ended up with Aragon, a golden retriever/yellow lab mix.

As a consolation prize, she was given a golden bracelet at the class graduation ceremony.

"They wanted me to go home with something golden," she says.

"I wanted a golden retriever but I wouldn't trade him now for 10 goldens."

When not counseling – in his own special manner – Aragon spends his work days wearing a blue Canine Companions for Independence vest, often lounging in the main office at Turner's stirring occasionally to yawn and leaping to his feet to greet visitors.

But Turner says Aragon is hardly a robot dog.

"When I take off his vest and give him the release command, he's like a normal dog, he gets into mischief."

Mostly, Aragon counsels merely through his steadfast presence. As part of his facility dog training, he can retrieve objects, but his primary job is to offer comfort by sitting quietly as someone pats him or by resting his head in the lap of a grieving relative.

"One person came up with a really good description," says Turner. "They called him 'an angel with fur.'"