Duncan does Good

Story by Diane Epps

You can hear the soft clicking echo of his steps in the hallway, a backpack slung tightly to him sways back and forth with the movements. He looks side to side as he calmly walks through the hall, searching for a particular door. He has a regal look about him, tall and slender with dark eyes and white hair dotted with patches of black.

When they reach the correct doorway he stands patiently waiting for the invitation to come in. An elderly veteran skootches himself up a bit on the bed, a smile breaks across his face "Come on Duncan" he waits for the soft leap up to his bed. Receiving a welcoming lick on the cheek the veteran pats Duncan with a shaking hand, his pleasure at the visit obvious.

The three-year old carefully moves around the elderly man and lying down adjusts himself close to him. This will make the veteran's day, this visit from one of the most feared dog breeds in the country. He lies down with a sigh, his movements stilled so the veteran can touch him with ease.

Duncan is a service dog. Trained to work with children or adults in a service capacity, he listens to children read or just makes an older veteran happy by snuggling up on a bed. It isn't unusual for service dogs to visit schools or a hospital except Duncan is a unique service dog. Duncan is a purebred Staffordshire terrier, more commonly known as a Pit Bull.

He yawns lazily as his owner chats with the veteran. Completely at home with all kinds of people it is hard to imagine this animal has a dubious reputation for violent attacks. Duncan was rescued from the Calhoun County Animal Shelter by his owners John and Danielle Di Pierro of Battle Creek. Once Duncan became a member of their family the Di Pierro's wanted to find a way to share Duncan with other people. The service dog program seemed like a logical path.

Trained using German he responds to commands easily and he successfully completed the service dog program with honors. The Di Pierro's then looked for ways to use Duncan to help dispel the reputation of the breed as being vicious attack dogs. Danielle is an elementary teacher and made arrangements for Duncan to participate in the reading program at the school she works in.

The project was so successful that the Di Pierro's asked family for suggestions of other locations they might share Duncan's friendly temperament. The Di Pierro's have family that work for the National Guard and the Veteran's homes were suggested. After some skeptical coordination with the Veteran's Home in Battle Creek, Duncan made his first visit to the center. The reaction of the veterans was so positive that the couple made arrangements to visit the home regularly.

There are plenty of studies to support the positive impact of animals on ill people. Veterans being connected to community members looking for a way to show support for our military personnel makes the impact that much better. The Di Pierro's admit that they have benefitted as much as the veterans they visit, they feel as though they are giving something back to the vets for the service they have given to the country. Everyone wins in this relationship.

Now Duncan and the Di Pierro's are regular faces in the halls. Staff and patients alike welcome his visits and many still comment on the gentle nature of this allegedly vicious dog breed. The Di Pierro's have since added another Pit Bull to their home and hope to start him in the service dog project soon. In the meantime, Duncan and his backpack sway calmly through the halls of the Veteran Center, wagging his tail and providing a welcoming lick to the friends he has made.

Photo courtesy of the Di Pierro family

Duncan sits with school children during reading time. Duncan is a Staffordshire Terrier trained as a service dog to listen to the children read in their schools or to make special visits to veterans.