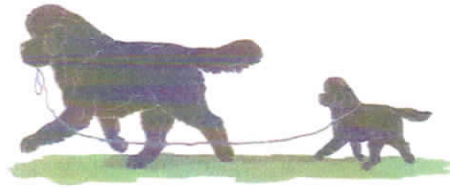


Why Start a “Life Challenge” Dog Club?

By L.M. Shannon-Chaillet
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*“Do not follow where the path may lead.
Go instead where there is no path
and leave a trail.”
By Muriel Strode*



How many dog training clubs hold a “*special*” dog competition for people who have been diagnosed with Down’s Syndrome, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, attention deficit disorder, autism, speech, hearing and emotionally disabled or are paraplegic or legally blind?

How many dog training clubs adapt the training methods or set up agility equipment to meet their member’s physical and mental disability needs?

How many dog training clubs attempt to stimulate and challenge the bodies and the minds of their members into resolving life’s little canine problems? And, how many dog training classes use obedience and agility judge’s completed competition worksheets for evaluating and furthering each member’s progress?

I am sure you are aware that there are few dog training classes that attempt to accomplish these goals. Yet even though organizing such a class and competition for disable people is challenging, it can be, and indeed, has been, accomplished. I have been involved with such a program for several years, and it is because of our success that I am sharing our program outline.

I will not lie and tell you organizing and teaching a dog training class for disabled students is easy. Bringing about a means to an end and climbing prejudicial mountain on behalf of the disabled can be very frustrating at times.



The job requires a strong sense of commitment and a willingness to “go instead where there is no path.” It requires good organizational skill and knowledge of canine behavior, anatomy and veterinary care. It requires training in canine obedience and agility, as well as, knowledge of dog showing and handling.

It also requires an understanding of physical and mental disabilities, a knowledge of developmental states of human behavior, and a knowledge (or willingness to learn) of the characteristics of many different physical and

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mental disabilities and the medical care for each of these disabilities.



Above all, organizing and teaching a dog training club for disabled people requires good public relations and managerial skill. The leader(s) must be willing to delegate responsibility to various people and to honor the manner in which these people choose to do their job. The leader(s) must be able to assist with ideas for accomplishing a job, yet be open to suggestions from the people performing the job.

To give you a brief background, our class was formed in 1988 when Patti Dynes son expressed an interest in learning to train his

puppy. When Patti searched for a class in which he could participate, she was unable to find a club in her small town of Galien, Michigan that could accommodate a child with Down 's Syndrome. Unfortunately, she was unable to find one club in the entire State of Michigan that could accommodate a child with a disability.

Determined to fill a need that was going unmet, Patti's investigations lead her to the 4-H Club of America. After completing their affiliation requirements, Patti formed the club with the specific purpose of teaching dog training to disabled people. This group is now known as Best Friends 4-H Club, a name chosen by the members themselves.

In the years the club has existed, we at Best Friends have developed methods of canine training that match the needs of our members. Through ongoing experimentation and modifications, we are constantly adding to our knowledge.

In our program, each student is assigned a team instructor with whom he or she will work one-on-one. The team instructor is knowledgeable (or willing to learn) about



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canine and canine training techniques, and is also knowledgeable (or willing to learn) about the physical or mental disability of the particular student with whom he or she is teamed.

Some students have dog of their own, but most often their families cannot afford the extra expense and responsibility of caring for a dog. In these cases, a volunteer dog is provided for the student. The student, the dog and the instructor form a “*team of three*” and work together throughout the nine week course.

With help from the Berrien County Youth Fair Dog Department in Berrien Springs, Michigan, we at Best Friends 4-H Club have even set up a yearly competition for our members. This gives our students an opportunity to show off their skills in dog handling and to take home trophies of accomplishment.

It is my hope that after today’s class in alternative education, that you will be encouraged to continue your efforts in becoming a teacher of special education and remembering that a therapy dog (for all of Best Friends 4-H Club’s volunteer canines are therapy dogs) can open up a student with disability’s mind and communication skills.

But please don’t forget about your best resource for material in alternative education...your local county 4-H office whose motto is “*To make the best better.*”

