

## Young pup learns the truth: It's a zoo out there

By Michael Waddell

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**North, a one-year-old golden retriever, takes in one of the Memphis Zoo exhibits with curator Courtney Janney while walking the grounds Thursday, July 9, 2020. Janney is training and socializing North to be a companion dog. (Patrick Lantrip/Daily Memphian)**

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Visitors to the Memphis Zoo should be on the lookout in the coming months for a very special 1-year-old golden retriever in a bright yellow cape, a future super dog of sorts.

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North just arrived at the zoo and is being trained over the next five months to be an assistance dog that will move on to help a recipient with physical disabilities.

Courtney Janney, an animal curator at the zoo, signed up for the Canine Companions for Independence program earlier this year, and she's excited to be working with North and raising awareness about the program in the Memphis area.

Headquartered in Santa Rosa, California, Canine Companions is the oldest and largest assistance dog organization in the U.S., with six regional centers.

"Growing up, we had a family friend who did puppy-raising for dogs that went on to be seeing-eye dogs, and I was always fascinated with doing something like that," Janney said. "Now that I have a job that will allow me to bring him to work and to put the time in, the stars finally aligned for me to do something like this."

Until November, Janney will teach North 30 commands, providing basic obedience instruction along with important socialization opportunities at the zoo.

"So I'm really focused on continuing his basic obedience but adding in all of the distractions that come with real life because he's not in a controlled setting anymore," said Janney, who has worked at the zoo for more than six years. "He'll see everything from people mowing lawns to cranes overhead to trams, golf carts and JCV's rolling by."



**“I’m really focused on continuing his basic obedience but adding in all of the distractions that come with real life because he’s not in a controlled setting anymore,” Courtney Janney said of North, who spent his first year at Hardeman County Correctional Facility, where he was paired with an inmate who taught him basic commands. (Patrick Lantrip/Daily Memphian)**

Correctional facilities have also partnered to train dogs, teaching them basic commands during their first year. The Hardeman County Correctional Facility has partnered with Canine Companions since 2017, and an inmate there took North under his wing last year.

“Our volunteer puppy-raisers are really critical to our mission,” Canine Companions spokesperson Martha Johnson said. “Normally, they would get the puppy at 8 weeks of age, keep it about 18 months, teach it commands, socialize it, provide all the food and vet care for the dog. And then they give the dog back to us where we provide another six months of professional training where they can learn more advanced skills before they’re placed with a person with a disability.”

The organization likes to get the puppies out of the prisons when they are about a year old, however, because they need socialization.

“The socialization right now is really key for North, and being at the zoo is going to be really helpful,” Johnson said. “The sights, sounds and people he is going to see will be important for his training.”

She pointed out that the zoo is looking at it as an opportunity for its animals to get acclimated to guests with visiting service dogs.

“We’re thrilled that the zoo is doing this for us,” Johnson said. “We both have a very similar love of animals, and we know how important that human-animal bond is.”

Canine Companions has its own breeding program, and its dogs are Labradors, golden retrievers and a cross between the two.

“Our service is primarily to people with physical disabilities, such as a person in a wheelchair who is a quadriplegic that maybe has a brain injury or a child with cerebral palsy or spina bifida who might need help with things as simple as picking up a remote control,” Johnson said.

The organization also provides hearing dogs and facility dogs that work in facilities such as hospitals and serve clients with special needs. All the dogs are trained to be comfortable around crowds and need to have the right temperament.

By the time they are given to a person with a disability, the dogs are trained in 40 commands, including the ability to turn light switches on and off, tug open refrigerator doors, pick things up off the floor, pull someone in a wheelchair and even help with credit card transactions by giving the card at check-out in their mouth.

Recipients are flown to Orlando, Florida, to be paired with their dog and receive two weeks of training, followed by a graduation ceremony. Within the Southeast region, Canine Companions has nearly 400 graduates, including 28 in Tennessee, and it has placed 23 dogs so far this year.

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Katie Taylor is the only Canine Companions recipient living in the Memphis area. She received her dog, Hans III, about six months ago after being on the waiting list for two years.

“I was very thrilled when I got that phone call,” said Taylor, 25, who has a form cerebral palsy that severely affects the movement of her legs. “So getting out and doing things is harder for me than it is for most people. One of the biggest things Hans does for me is motivates me to get out and stay physically active.”

Her dog pushes handicap buttons on doors for her and can pick up a pen or other items, which will be especially useful once she starts back to classes at the University of Memphis.

“I also suffer from a lot of social anxiety,” Taylor said. “So once we’re able to get back out into the community, it’s going to be really helpful for me going into new situations to have Hans there as an ice-breaker.”

Becoming a puppy-raiser involves an application process and home visits, and Canine Companions is looking for more people to sign up to help “finish” the dogs’ training for six months before they go on to their recipients.

### TOPICS

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