

Lucy: Helping take the bite out of court

Court can be intimidating – especially if you’re not used to it, and even if you are. Sometimes it’s nice to have a friendly face in the crowd, or by your side, to help ease the stress and give you a little bit of comfort.

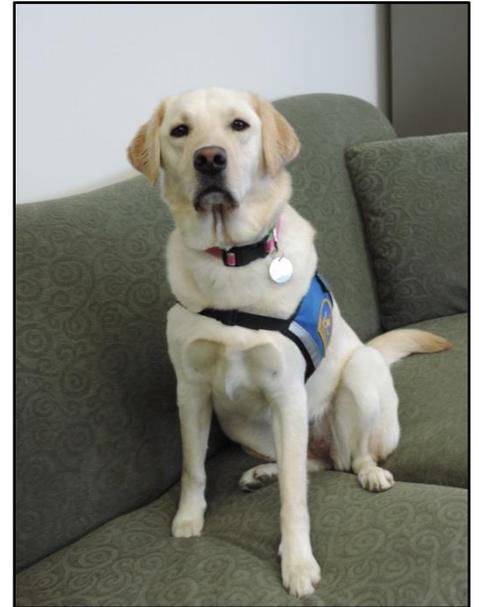
And if that face happens to be furry, with a wet, black nose and soulful brown eyes? So much the better.

That’s where Lucy comes in.

In the Snohomish County court system, Lucy is the friendly face people turn to time and time again. The three-year old Golden Retriever/Lab mix is the new court and facility dog for the county’s Prosecuting Attorney’s Office.

Lucy arrived in February 2014, taking the place of the county’s former service dog, Stilson, who retired along with his handler Heidi Potter in July 2013.

“When crimes happen in the county and they need to go through the legal system, [Lucy] helps them through the legal process,” said Kathy Murray, Lucy’s handler. “There was a horrific crime right after she got here, and we had a large, large group – about 24 different family members were in the conference room – and we brought her right into that. She was incredibly calming for people who were dealing with an unimaginable pain.”



Though she’s still getting her paws on the ground, Lucy works diligently with both the criminal and juvenile courts, as well as with Dawson Place Child Advocacy Center in Everett. In the juvenile system, Lucy and Murray spent equal time in the courtroom and in the halls and lobby, interacting with people who are there for trials or court appointments.

“There can be 50 people in the lobby at any given time and probably half of them are kids,” she said. “So I’ll walk through with [Lucy] and she’ll sit and visit, or shake hands, or whatever. I’m starting to learn how to read the people – if they look like they want her to come over or not.”

Over at Dawson Place, Lucy partners with Harper, a state-sponsored dog, to work with children who have been victimized and whose cases will be going to trial. In cases like these, Murray says, two dogs are better than one.

“Harper and Lucy immediately fell in love with each other and bonded, and they have a fabulous time working together,” Murray said. “They’ve done double visits, where something really bad has happened, and two dogs is never a bad thing. A little kid will be sitting in the middle and have both dogs on their lap.”

A two-year wait

Actually bringing Lucy to Snohomish County was a lengthy process. Potter, Stilson's handler, knew getting a new dog would take time, and started the search for a new handler well before she retired. Mark Roe selected Murray as the handler in 2012, and she began her training by attending a three-day course at the Canine Companions for Independence school in Santa Rosa, Calif.

Prospective handlers must pass the course before they can even begin training as a canine handler.

"We did interviews and they put you through different types of tests," Murray said. "If they select you, *then* you get put on a waiting list. At the end of three days, you come home and don't know if you're on the list or not."

Fortunately, Murray made the cut. Then she waited for two years.

In January 2014, Murray attended a pilot training program at the Canine Companions for Independence facility designed specifically for court and facility dogs.

"They used to train you for everything rather than just specifically that," she said. "They crunched it down to a one-week, super, super intensive training that basically was 24-7 where you were doing stuff with and for the dogs."

She spent the first three days working with a series of dogs as facility staffers observed; the goal was to find a good match between an appropriate service dog and a handler. On the fourth day, Murray was permanently assigned to Lucy.

"She came back to my dorm room that night and it was hilarious because she'd never been on a bed before, and that was our homework," she said. "It's a real bonding thing; you're supposed to be bonding with your dog and I actually videoed her getting on the bed for the first time and it was so funny. She was just burrowing and burrowing and I thought it was wonderful."

After the training was complete and both Lucy and Murray passed their final tests, they flew home – on the Saturday before the Superbowl – and came immediately to the office so Lucy could explore her new workplace for the first time with no distractions.

Lucy spent her first Monday meeting staff and on Tuesday launched right into work. And her calendar has been booked solid ever since.

Learning curve

If Lucy had a learning curve coming to Snohomish County, Murray had an even bigger one learning how to work with a service dog.

"Her intuition is amazing," she said. "If we go into a conference room full of people, she will go sit by the person who needs her the most. She knows that. It's crazy. I did not know that an animal could do that."

Murray said she continues to be amazed when she learns that Lucy has picked out a victim’s mother, or other family member, who’s most deeply affected by a court case.

Keeping Lucy on a routine has also been a bit of a change of pace. As Murray said – she had no idea how important a poop schedule could be. Yes, a poop schedule.

“She’s right on schedule and she’s got to stay on schedule so she doesn’t have any accidents during court,” Murray said. “Because that will ruin our program.”

When she’s wearing her “business suit” – her blue facility dog vest – Lucy is on her game, ready to do her job comforting people. When the suit comes off, then she gets to be a regular dog, Murray said. She hangs out with the lawyers in the PA’s office, cleans crumbs off the floor when people spill, and will wander from office to office with a toy, looking for someone to play with – if she’s not napping, of course.

Find more photos of Lucy online: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/snoco/sets/72157644689438811>

Watch behind-the-scenes video: <http://youtu.be/YIQIOrN55mY>

About Canine Companions

Charles Schultz and his wife founded the Canine Companions for Independence organization in 1975 to “enhance the lives of people with disabilities by providing highly trained assistance dogs and ongoing support to ensure quality partnerships.” The organization trains four types of assistance dogs: Service dogs, skilled companions, hearing dogs and facility dogs. Learn more about the organization at www.cci.org; find out about facility dogs by visiting www.cci.org/facilitydogs.