

# Success Breeds Success

BY PAMELA S. HOGLE

The drive that enabled Jennifer Arnold to build Canine Assistants, an Alpharetta, GA service dog organization, to its current success doubtless make her an inspiring role model for clients. Arnold along with her veterinarian husband, Dr. Kent Bruner, continually seeks ways to enhance their program and graduate a higher percentage of dogs that they train. Founded in 1991 by Arnold, Canine Assistants (CA) has grown to one of the country's largest organizations — graduating 75 service, companion, and seizure response dogs each year.



Dr. Kent Bruner, DVM, Canine Assistants

Initially training dogs from local shelters, Bruner and Arnold made a complete turnaround in their thinking following an encounter with Assistance Dog Institute founder Dr. Bonnie Bergin at a 1997 Delta Society meeting. Bruner and Bonnie were both featured as panelists for a discussion about selecting service dogs — Bruner was speaking about his commitment to adoption and training of rescue and shelter dogs; while Bonnie was presenting her rationale for breeding service dog puppies. Struck by the points she made, Bruner completely changed his approach and initiated a breeding program at Canine Assistants.

Their meeting at the Delta Society led to a longer-term association between CA and the Institute — Bruner attended the Institute's Service Dog Training Seminar in 1998. And, CA has since adopted practices learned at the Institute. For example, CA has employed key Institute training methods, and has completely changed its approach to client matching and training. "The group training camps have been instrumental to our success. Prior to that time, we worked with folks on an individual basis and missed out on the group dynamics created by training camps. Training camp has allowed us to better prepare our clients for handling their service dog and has increased our success in matching person and dog as a team," Bruner explains.

"We follow Bonnie's techniques of personality matching our recipients and their dogs as part of the process of finding the right dog for each of our clients," he continues. "It still amazes us to see people fall in love with a dog we had predicted would be appropriate for them based on the personality surveys conducted prior to training camp."

CA has a puppy nursery where about 15 litters are whelped and raised each year. The puppies are handled and trained by Arnold, CA staff trainers, and a select team of nursery volunteers. At 8 weeks of age, the puppies move out of the nursery and continue working with CA's trainers to complete their education.

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"We are now graduating dogs that are easier for our clients to use with a longer, healthier working career. The most important factor for us in changing to the breeding program was not what would be easiest for us, but what would be the best for the people we serve. We believe that this has certainly been the case," Bruner concludes.

However, as many who breed service dog puppies might expect, Bruner found that many CA puppies possessed an excessive degree of hip joint laxity, an indicator of potential hip osteoarthritis. (See related story below on CA's approach to reducing hip dysplasia in its dogs.)

Besides looking at hip laxity, Bruner looks at other health issues in his breeders, including elbow dysplasia, normal heart and eye exams, epilepsy, car sickness, allergies, cancer, and overall longevity — but in a service dog program, a primary concern is always temperament. "It's a challenge to find dogs which are low aroused

enough to be easily handled and yet willing to be good workers," he says.

He looks for a temperament similar to that prized by the Institute: "The majority of our dogs would be heavily weighed towards an amiable personality which allows them to be handled by a broad spectrum of clients. We also consider trainability, natural retrieving and work ethic in selecting breeders. It is very much a balancing act between ease of handling and desire to work."

The move to breeding and careful attention to temperament, hips, and overall health has paid off for CA. "It is very comforting to me to know that when we place a dog in service, that dog will not be limited by hips, eyes, heart, etc. and the owner can expect a long working career," Bruner says. 