

perfect pair

Main Line Deputy Dog takes a team approach to canine service. BY J.F. PIRRO

THREE TOURS IN IRAQ have taken their toll on Tim, who suffers from psychiatric trauma and physical injuries. He generally needs his space, keeping others at an acceptable distance—the sort of space Monte helps provide. The dog's posting, clearing and blocking skills allow his owner to venture out more than he otherwise would. And that has allowed Tim to reestablish a semblance of a social life.

Credit Main Line Deputy Dog, an upstart nonprofit dedicated to helping people with physical challenges or mental-health concerns train their own dogs to be fully certified service animals. It's the creation of Wayne's Mark Stieber, who began working with dog-human teams in partnership with Mary Remer, a nationally renowned dog trainer, breeder and licensed American Kennel Club judge. Her company, What a Good Dog, has a center in Frazer and also operates from the basement of the home at her family's famed Ardrossan estate in Villanova.

"I often go out and practice with them, or volunteers do," says Stieber, who lives with his black Lab, Brigus, and a beagle named Huck. "There's a lot of fieldwork at malls—especially food courts, where we're training a dog not to go after anything that's fallen on the floor."

A Villanova University graduate and a former vice president of marketing at QVC, Stieber fell in love with the concept of service dogs after reading an article about them. Earning his degree in nonprofit management from La Salle University in 2010, he started Main Line Deputy Dog a year later, taking inspiration from the venerable Top Dog in Arizona.

Training is tailored to an owner's needs. A dog can provide balance and stability, help a person from a chair or bed, get the mail, carry the laundry, push or pull a wheelchair, open and close doors, turn lights on and off, summon assistance, retrieve medication and water, even serve as an alarm.

Some dogs, like Virgil, a rescued golden-retriever mix, come equipped with what's essentially a handle for their human partner. Virgil's owner, Liam Dougherty, has Friedreich's Ataxia, a hereditary disease that affects balance, so he walks in tandem with his dog.

The history of working dogs began some 100 years ago with the advent of the Seeing Eye variety. By the 1930s, there were hearing-assistance dogs. Forty years later, Top Dog took flight. It was the innovation of the late Stew Nordensson, who had cerebral palsy and began training his own pet. Assistance Dogs International is the governing body for certification.

The most current evolution is psychiatric service dogs for returning veterans like Tim. "We're all studying it," Stieber says.

Stieber thinks back to his live-in grandmother and wonders what a service dog might have done for her. "It would've changed our family dynamics," he says. "What can dogs do? We haven't even figured it all out yet."

GETTING MAIN LINE DEPUTY DOG off the ground meant getting the word out. And while Stieber once thrived in advertising and marketing, he came to understand that the conventional channels don't always work. Word of mouth has proven most effective, through speaking engagements at local disability-specific organizations.

Right now, there are 14 dog-human teams enrolled in three classes that progress from beginner to advanced—and there's a waiting list. "I get a call almost every day," Stieber says.

Of his clients, half have their own dogs; others adopt based on the training required. "It has to be a working dog," he stresses. "The family dog won't necessarily work."

Some bark about how demanding the training must be. "But dogs need something to do," says Stieber. "It makes their lives so much more fulfilled."

Half of 1 percent of eligible Americans has a certified service dog. "That means we could be training for years and years, and still not scratch the surface," Stieber says. "The numbers are staggering.

We could start satellites in other areas and still have plenty of work at each location."

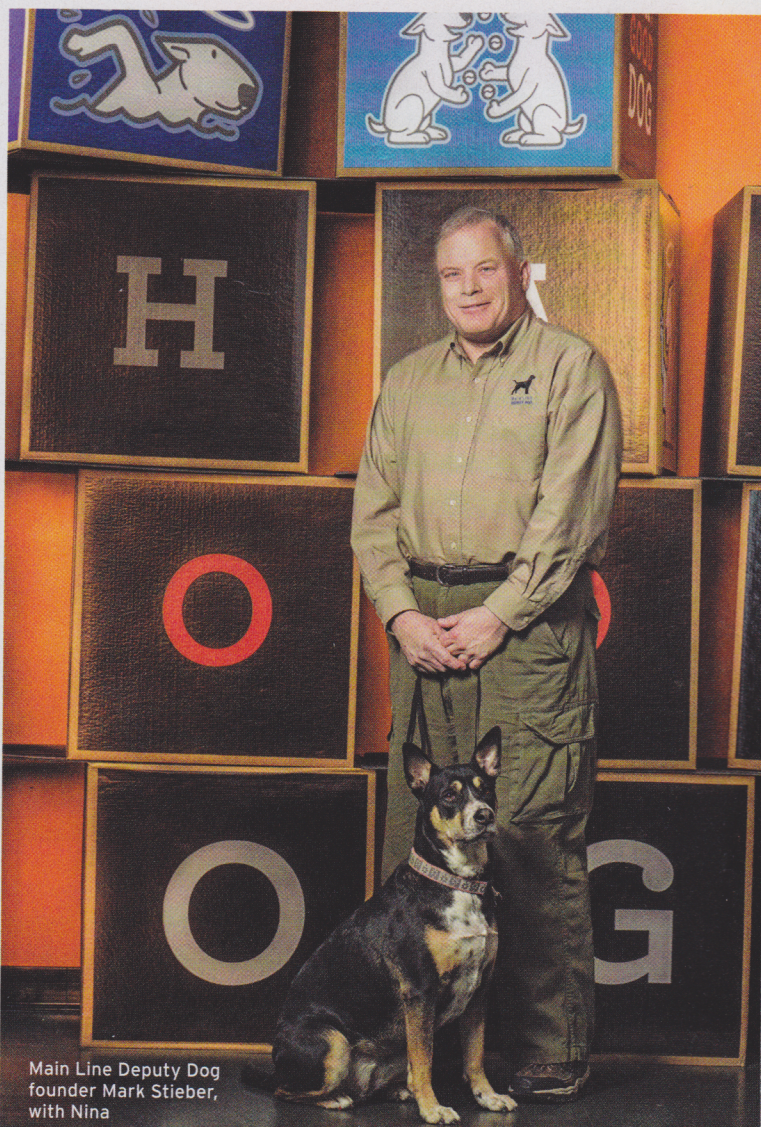
It's a wide-open market, and the need for trainers, assistants and volunteers is immense. "While working as a volunteer for Deputy Dog, I see dogs partnered with their people, and the bond develops and expands into a fascinating relationship where pride and accomplishment go both ways," says Berwyn's Lisa Loeb, author of the recent book, *Ambassador Dogs* (see interview on page 65).

There is an endgame, of course: graduation. But it doesn't come easily. Teams may have to take a session level more than once before moving on, and a final test is scored by two evaluators, who grade on obedience, communication, assistance, precision and, most importantly, teamwork.

Several Deputy Dog teams are getting close to taking the mandatory test—probably this spring. The national guidelines require six months of training, but Stieber figures two years is a more realistic time span when you're doing the work yourself. "It's hard enough training a dog to be perfectly disciplined, let alone training in task-specific requirements," he says.

At Main Line Deputy Dog, total fees average \$3,000-\$5,000. It can be up to \$25,000 at bigger, national organizations. "I love the way we do it," Stieber says. "It takes the right time and the right person, and, of course, the right dog."

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Main Line Deputy Dog founder Mark Stieber, with Nina