

Trainer focuses on rescue dogs

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Betsy Abeel walks her border collie, Snoopy, with Christine Mahaney and her dogs Toula and Cole. **Lisa Perkins/Record-Eagle** (Click for larger image)

TRAVERSE CITY -- When Dave and Betsy Abeel decided to add a dog to their family last fall, they knew they wanted to give a rescue animal a home.

After weeks of computer searches, phone calls and home visits, the Abeel's were paired with Snoopy, a 6-year-old border collie, through the North Star Border Collie Rescue in Traverse City. Snoopy, who joined their household just after Christmas, came with an added bonus -- a visit from professional dog trainer, Christine Mahaney.

Mahaney, who had worked with Snoopy in his previous home, made a visit to the Abeel's to help re-home the owner relinquished pet.

"All of our other dogs had been Chevys and we weren't sure we were ready for a Porsche and all of the maintenance it requires," said Betsy Abeel, who knew that a border collie is a bundle of mental and physical energy.

Harnessing that energy and creating a loving family pet is what Mahaney does best. The Plainwell-based trainer, who has personally fostered rescue dogs for more than five years, uses her understanding of rescue dog's needs and behaviors to transform them into a well-behaved companion.

"Having a dog should enhance your life, not complicate your life. They just want to be your companion," said Mahaney, who brought Toula and Cole, her own rescued border collies, to assist in making Snoopy feel right at home.

Toula is a true rescue success story. Trained by Mahaney since she was born in an animal shelter more than five years ago, Toula has been nationally recognized for her talents earning the name of "America's Most Talented Pet" in a 2007 nationwide competition held by pet retailer PETCO. She will make her film debut in "Public Enemies," a movie starring Johnny Depp, Christian Bale and Channing Tatum set for release later this year.

While Snoopy probably won't make it onto the big screen, the Abeel's are hoping for some advice on making him a happier pet.

"He does have a few issues," said Betsy, noting that Snoopy is very sensitive to noise and is frightened of garbage trucks, snowplows and school busses.

Addressing Snoopy's fear, Mahaney demonstrated how to deal with his resistance during a walk with Betsy, Snoopy, Toula and Cole near Central Grade School.

"Snoopy was able to see that Toula and Cole remained calm and was able to be calm with the pack," said Mahaney, who rewarded Snoopy for his positive behavior and reminded Betsy that her job is to keep Snoopy focused.

"It was amazing to walk downtown with him, really off the charts," said Betsy, who was able to walk Snoopy without him reacting to loud noises after just a few hours of training with Mahaney.

With a deeper understanding of why Snoopy behaves the way he does, the Abeel's are confident he has found a forever home.

"It is more fun to have a dog when you understand what they are all about, and how we can help him be a great dog," Betsy said.

Mahaney, who conducts private in-home visits, says she is gratified to see Snoopy go to a really great home.

For more information on rescue adoptions, visit www.petfinder.com. To view Toula's award winning performance, or for more information on Christine Mahaney visit www.whatadog.net or call (616) 648-6840.