

# TELL ME YOUR STORY AND I WILL LISTEN

A Courthouse Dog Arrives in Glenwood Springs

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHY CAITLIN CAUSEY

"All Who Enter Here Will Find Love," reads a sign hanging outside the River Bridge Regional Center in Glenwood Springs.

These days, there is a little more love inside the homelike walls of the nonprofit's facility on 21st Street. The nationally accredited advocacy center for abused and neglected children recently welcomed a new member to their team. This employee is specially trained to show the most vulnerable young members of our community a special kind of love: the slobbery, snuggly, canine kind.

Enter Frasier. Lanky and doe-eyed at two years old, this gentleman comes equipped with soft blonde fur, shakable paws and an adorably knobby head suitable for petting. Frasier also just happens to have recently graduated from an elite program with Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), a California-based organization that trained him to become a certified courthouse facility dog. Frasier comes to the Roaring Fork Valley prepared to serve, comfort and befriend the nearly 180 children River Bridge assists every year.

"It's basically the Ivy League of dog training," says Meghan Hurley, River Bridge's mental health therapist and Frasier's new owner. "He was specially bred by CCI, and then at eight weeks, he was placed with one of their volunteer puppy raisers - actually here in Colorado. He lived with that family for 18 months, received some intensive training and then left for San Diego to receive further training for another six months."

Hurley traveled to California in early August to train with CCI's latest class of facility dogs during the program's final two weeks, when she was matched with Frasier. "He will live with me and my family as a pet dog when he's not working, but otherwise he'll be at the advocacy

center serving all the kids who come through River Bridge," she says.

Frasier will have his work cut out for him, but his world-class training and gentle demeanor make him a perfect fit for the job. His official position as "resident buddy" will hopefully give River Bridge kids the courage to speak more comfortably about the traumatic events they have experienced.

"After abuse is reported, we need more information," says River Bridge's Forensic Interviewer Kerry Ach. "A child will come here for an interview, and the idea is that the facility dog will help them feel comfortable enough to talk to us. We need the child speaking in his or her own words. What we're learning is that there is a unique biological response when a dog is present, with lower stress and anxiety levels improving memory and recall."

River Bridge plans to employ Frasier's calming presence whenever a child wants his company. This could mean being called upon during forensic interviews, therapy sessions, or even as a young person takes the witness stand to testify against his or her abuser.

"Sometimes a child just likes to have the facility dog in the room, or at their feet. They may or may not want to pet him. Other times they will tell their entire story, not to the interviewer - but directly to the dog," Ach notes. "The level of comfort the dog brings to this kind of experience in a child's life can mean all the difference as we determine the details of a case."

Hurley agreed that Frasier is poised to make a big difference.

"The bottom line is that kids are afraid to tell - about the abuse, about their abuser. If we don't have a child who's able to disclose, then it is difficult to move forward with prosecution," she says. Since many cases do not ultimately go to trial due to the lack of a disclosure, the hope is that, over time, Frasier may alter those statistics by helping



*Frasier posing with two volunteer models, the daughters of River Bridge's mental health therapist Meghan Hurley.*



more kids feel brave enough to open up about the crimes committed against them.

"Having the dog nearby could help them gain independence from their offender, from following their offender's rule of silence," Hurley continues. "What we know about abuse is that it thrives in silence - so it will be very interesting to see if Frasier can help these children feel more courageous. If he can make them feel freed from the rules of their perpetrators, he's done his job."

Now that Frasier has arrived at River Bridge and is prepared to serve in the courtroom when needed, local officials have sought assistance in proper facility dog protocol. That's where Ellen O'Neill-Stephens and Celeste Walsen of the Courthouse Dogs Foundation stepped in. For the past several years, their Seattle-based group has been helping legal professionals around the country learn how to appropriately manage the use of facility dogs. "We do not train the dogs. What we

do is train the people: the judges, attorneys, victim advocates and the forensic interviewers," says Walsen, a former veterinarian. "We assist agencies that have decided to bring in a facility dog and help guide them through program development."

O'Neill-Stephens, who worked as a prosecuting attorney for 26 years prior to her work with Courthouse Dogs, says a key component of their specialized training is teaching the River Bridge team to effectively use Frasier's presence without disrupting legal proceedings.

"Part of what I teach is how to have these dogs be present during the investigation and prosecution of crimes without creating any sort of legal issues," she says, adding that the dog could adversely impact the outcome of a case if handled improperly in a courtroom. Both Hurley and O'Neill-Stephens emphasized that courthouse dogs are utilized solely for the purpose of comforting a young victim and are never intended to sway a verdict. Thus, proper training for the dogs - and their humans - is essential.

O'Neill-Stephens also stressed that Frasier's title is specific to his work alongside the River Bridge team: that he is trained as a *facility* dog, not a service or therapy dog. "Facility dogs are placed with a professional, assisting in his or her work. There can be school facility dogs, hospital facility dogs, or in Frasier's case, a courthouse facility dog. These are not service dogs, because those types of dogs serve people with a disability," she explains. "That is a very important distinction. Courthouse facility dogs are specifically trained to work in high-stress environments."

Can Frasier handle the pressure? Absolutely.

"If he was lying at a child's feet on the witness stand, no one in the room would even know he was there," Hurley revealed.

Hurley estimates that Frasier will spend the next eight to 10 years doing his life's work with the abused and neglected kids who pass through River Bridge. Hundreds of children will have the opportunity to shake his paw, scratch his ears and feel his calming presence as they face the most difficult experiences of their young lives.

Good boy, Frasier! That is the kind of unconditional love that only man's best friend can provide. Welcome to the Roaring Fork Valley.