

Glenda Keller – KSDS Board

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

It's fun watching a puppy grow. Seeing a dog grow and learn is one of the benefits of taking the dog project in 4-H. Today we'll learn about a group of people involved with the 4-H dog project who not only developed their dogs, they helped develop a new service which is now benefitting hundreds of people with disabilities. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Glenda Keller is a long-time K-State Research and Extension agent in Washington County. She explained that, in the 1980s, she had 4-Hers in the dog project who were raising puppies for out-of-state guide dog services. As the 4-Hers tracked where those dogs went, they found that virtually none of the dogs were being placed in the Midwest. The dogs were being shipped to the populated areas on the east and west coast.

So, 4-H leaders and others in Washington County wanted to set up a service through which dogs could be trained to serve people with disabilities in the central section of the country. In 1990, these leaders organized the Kansas Specialty Dog Service, also known as KSDS Inc. It was established in the county seat: the rural community of Washington, population 1,197 people. Now, that's rural.

A former restaurant building in Washington was available. It became the dog training center with a canine housing unit next door. Local volunteers set out to train dogs to assist people who are blind or otherwise handicapped.

KSDS now offers three separate programs: Guide dogs to help the visually impaired, service dogs to help those who are physically impaired, and social dogs which are utilized in medical settings, by educational facilities, and by social work professionals.

The primary breeds of dogs used in this service are yellow and black labrador retrievers and golden retrievers. Most of the dogs are born and bred in Washington County, and then are placed with puppy raisers across 17 states. The puppy raisers care for the dogs from the age of eight weeks to 18 or 20 weeks, at which point the dogs come back to Washington.

All the dogs are screened at the K-State veterinary school to evaluate their temperament and physical characteristics such as the dogs' eyes and hips. If a dog should not meet the standard for some reason, the puppy raisers get first choice to acquire the dog. If the puppy raiser declines, there is a waiting list of others who are interested in the dogs.

But those dogs who do pass are slated for a rewarding career as an assistance dog. KSDS trainers evaluate what type of service work the dog is best suited for, and what type of training would be most appropriate for them.

Meanwhile, KSDS receives applications from individuals who have a need for a service dog trained for special needs. In order to help understand the type of setting in which the dog will work, applicants might be asked to send in a video of their home and surroundings. KSDS will evaluate the physical demands and type of assistance needed, and then try to find the ideal match of the person and the dog. When the dog is two years old, it will be matched and placed with a person.

Remarkably, this service is free of charge to the recipients. KSDS has been offering this service from its home base in Washington for 21 years. Glenda Keller, now retired, is Vice President of the KSDS Board of Directors.

“We’ve defied all odds to be successful here,” Glenda said. “There were a lot of naysayers when we got started. But these dogs are changing the lives of the people they work with. It’s almost a miracle,” she said.

It’s fun watching a puppy grow. It can be rewarding to see a dog grow and develop, as we experienced in the 4-H dog project. Glenda Keller and other 4-H leaders have made a difference by helping their 4-Hers and their dogs to grow, and by helping the Kansas Specialty Dog Service to grow as well.

And there’s more. Next week, we’ll learn about the remarkable performance of these assistance dogs in the day-to-day life of their owners.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.