**Interview Questions: Donna Hill at Donna Hill’s Service Dog Training Institute.**

**Date of Interview: March 12th, 2024**

<https://servicedogtraininginstitute.online/>

1. When you were starting your business, where did you source the money required for start- up?
   * Used own savings – she is frugal and risk-aversive with finances, using savings is the lowest risk and she did not want to get into debt. She started small with what she could afford and used the profits to grow.
   * She has been running and growing her business the past 15 years
2. In the past, What other services have you offered to meet operational costs through your business, before you were able to focus exclusively on service dogs?
   * Did not discuss

1. How many years did it take before you felt you ‘found your feet’ in the service dog training industry?
   * Did not discuss
2. Have you found there is a greater demand for owner-trained dogs, or pre-trained dogs?
   * She focuses on helping owners train their dogs. This way she is able to help people regardless of where they are at as she offers training through online coaching, online classes, and in person. She says in-person coaching certainly has an advantage, but people who follow and complete her program online have been very successful in meeting their goals- whether just for an obedient pet or to pass the public access training.
   * She prefers having people involved in training their dogs, because a lot of people have unrealistic expectations with pre-trained dogs. There are lawsuits against dog training schools and service dog providers because people did not expect their dog to act like one, or the dog does not meet their expectations. This way, in being involved in or training their own dog, people can see first-hand the effort that goes into training the dog and learn about natural dog behaviors- they have a better idea of what to expect after training.
   * Her training school is flexible- people can choose to receive support for what they need help with or what they want to work on, and tailor the program for their goals and where they are at. By offering online courses and Zoom coaching, she is able to help people train their own dogs internationally.

1. When choosing your business model, why did you decide to stay a private for-profit, rather than become a non-profit like many service dog organizations?
   * She has worked for other non-profits in animal welfare, and finds that overtime, as the board of directors and members are replaced, the organization tends to veer from its original mission and can become something else entirely that has compromised the animals’ welfare, in her past experience.
   * Remaining private allowed her to remain in control and run the program as she chose.
2. You have different streams of revenue coming in through service-dog related activities. Which services provide the greatest percentage of your annual revenue, and which provide the least?
   * Online classes generally provide the most income (per time, effort)
   * Very specific, specialized in-person classes, such as preparing for specific airlines and flights, pay the least and are labor and time-intensive.
3. What type of service dog (specialty) have you experienced the greatest demand for?
   * Anxiety and PTSD - psychiatric
4. What are the most common breeds in your training programs? Which are generally the most successful?
   * The most common breeds seen are labradors and golden retrievers. She also frequently sees standard poodles.
   * Health and temperament are the most critical traits in a service dog, above specific breed.
   * Critical that a dog for service work is health tests- OFA, hips, shoulders, etc. and that they are healthy and mechanically sound for a long working life and to be able to complete their job. Also, vet care is expensive- you do not want people with disabilities to end up with a dog they cannot afford to provide care for.
5. Have you had experience training mixed breeds, rescues or shelter dogs, or owner surrendered dogs for service work? If so, what do you estimate their success rate is?

* Did not discuss, she has worked with a range of people with dogs of multiple breeds from multiple sources

1. Approximately what percentage of dogs pass the public access test after your program? Both trained by you and trained by their owners?

•Very hard to estimate because of the amount of people she supports online and internationally. Also, people who are mentally unstable will have lower success rate because of their inability to adhere to the program, rather than due to the program itself- they need to be able to be sufficiently consistent and stable to train the dog.

•People in the program also may not continue to complete public access work, whether because it is not a goal of theirs or they do not follow through with the program.

•People who complete a full program, train their dog for and take it to the public access test are generally very successful

1. Which type of disability do you serve the most?

* Anxiety and PTSD

1. Is there much demand for non-public access certified dogs, for in-home support only, comfort dogs, or therapy dogs/facility dogs?
   * The goal of her program is to get dogs trained to be certified for public access, so she doesn’t focus on training dogs for pets although sometimes dogs in the program end up being just pets and companions
2. What are the main demographics that you see in your customers- age, gender, disability, socioeconomic status?
   * Mostly females
   * Age varies, most range between 25-45 years
3. For how long after canine placement, or completing training, do clients need continued support with their service dogs? How often do you follow up with clients?

* She leaves this up to the client.
* She likes to have a ‘phase out’ at the end of the process, where support is reduced in frequency until the client feels competent enough to maintain the dog on their own, although they are able to book check ins and consults in the future after that point. Depending on the person’s ability to work with the dogs affects how long they need ongoing support. Her program is very flexible.

1. Have you already sold/placed trained dogs to people in other parts of the country (outside of BC/Alberta/Nova Scotia) where public access certification is not required?

* Did not discuss

1. What changes have you seen in the service dog industry over the past three years?

* Not just in the last three years, but on going; she has had more interest and clients as people learn that it is possible to train their own service dogs. Previously, the understanding of sourcing service dogs was limited, and common belief was that they had to obtained through schools.
* More demand for coaching to train their dog as a service dog and support in getting it certified
* Greater demand for psychiatric service dogs

1. What do you predict for the service dog industry’s future?
   * She has received requests from people with PTSD/anxiety who are female and survivors of assault, domestic abuse, etc. that are generally excluded from other serviced offering dogs trained for psychiatric support, because programs providing dogs for people with PTSD are oriented towards men who are in the military, veterans, or other male first responders. There is not a service dog provider that is serving female clients with PTSD. She has most of her requests for services and dogs from females with PTSD and anxiety and predicts this will continue
   * High demand will continue- people becoming more stressed, and with more complex anxiety from disruption of school and social life post pandemic and with all other changes happening in the 21st century
   * Greater awareness, visibility, and policy changes enabling service dog public access has led and will likely lead to continued increase in demand for service dogs
2. Other
   * She is not certified, because she did not train under an accredited trainer (required for certification). She learned independently, through life experience and hands on practice, and experiential learning. She loves trying new things and applying what she reads, but always uses positive reinforcement/ positive training methods, and uses a lot of clicker training. Her expansion into training service dogs came from her interest in teaching her dogs new tricks and seeing what they were capable of learning.
   * She has a degree in education and zoology.
   * The hardest part of preparing a dog for service work is getting them to the standard to pass public access training. If the dog has the personality and ability to consistently behave in public and pass public access training, then teaching the skills required to support the person they are matched with is just more training and less of a concern- actually easier to teach those then prepare for public access.
   * Problems with the job: the human clients can be difficult and expect you to be a coach, dog trainer, psychologist, and social worker, all at once. It can be really discouraging, especially with rude or unreasonable requests and unrealistic demands from clients. Not everyone has the patience or attitude necessary to train animals and maintain that training. The people who are successful in the program realize that it takes ongoing work to have a well trained dog. Also, while people with mobility/visual/hearing impairments are generally lower stress clients, she gets a lot of clients who have PTSD and anxiety, that are easily triggered or respond from a place of fear and are not thinking clearly- this can create a lot of stress and she has had to end relationships with clients because it just was not working out. She has experienced burn out- not from the dogs, but from trying to help people and manage their expectations (eg. people thinking she has no time off and they can call at any time, and she should respond right away).
   * You will never ever please everyone. Some people have different learning styles and some methods of teaching will not appeal to them or work for them.