

Don't keep making excuses for your dog's poor behaviour, says trainer Jim Tsitanidis of Spirit Ridge K9 Training & Rescue - seek help

BY JOAN MURRAY, *editor*

Jim Tsitanidis is dedicated to a breed of dog you may not have even heard of – the Belgian Shepherd, and in particular the Malinois variety of the Belgian Shepherd.

Formerly working at the management level in corporate health care, Jim Tsitanidis has been training this breed since 1986 now, and as his interest in training developed, so did his interest in rescue. Now he is actively involved in what he calls the 'Triple R' for them – rescue, rehabilitation and rehome.

Malinois are a very intense breed – they are very focused, love to work, and have no fear. In Europe, where most dog handlers are professionals, this makes them an excellent breed for the kind of work German Shepherds often do on this continent, where many handlers are not professionals.

That very intensity, however, can make the Belgian Shepherd difficult to control in the wrong hands or in the wrong circumstances. By the time they are in need of rescue, they can be difficult to manage.

Jim's involvement in the rescue side really began five years ago, with Zorro, who was abandoned in the Ottawa area, and, says Jim, "required all his expertise to bring under control."

Jim moved to this area in 2005, and has 22 acres north of Hillsburgh, where he has built training pens and runs behaviour classes at Spirit Ridge K9 Training and Rescue. Profits from behaviour modification and training are ploughed back into rescue operations for dog's needing help.

He and his wife, Suzanne Adams, and assistant trainer, have rescued 9 dogs, and kept two of them, Jese and Tequila. They realized Jese was a great agility dog, Jim says, and they use her for agility training. Tequila had a rough ride, and so they decided to keep him – "with us, he's a great pet," Jim says.

As Jim became more involved in training and in rescue, he also became more interested in what he calls the "pre-emptive" side of the canine control business.

He realized that by helping people who are having trouble with their dogs at home, he could reduce the number of dogs who eventually end up needing rescue.

"Most problems occur when people treat their dogs as humans," Jim says, "when dogs are humanized." He considers himself to be a "dog translator," who translates the signals the dog is sending.

"When they 'stress' and bark, humans want to nurture them" he says. "Dogs interpret this as ENCOURAGEMENT." Instead of rewarding the behaviour you don't want, you need to reward the behaviour you do.

Jim likes to go in and assess the living environment of the humans and the dog; the owners give examples of how they feed and walk the animal. Once Jim has a handle on the environment, he explains what the dog is telling the owners. Then he gives them advice on what they can do to change the behaviour that is causing a problem.

"In 99% of the cases I can pretty much guarantee success, IF there is 100% compliance by the humans," he says. "In that other 1%, sometimes poor genetics come into play, and the dog can't be rehabilitated – the aggression can only be managed.

"My objective is to get the dogs under control in the household," he says, "and then get it so people can walk them outside."

Dogs have to be walked properly, he says, then they don't end up being discarded and in humane society shelters.

When Jim became interested in training, he took a trainer's course that specialized in aggression, behaviour modification, police work and dog sports.

In addition to his work in the home environment, he also offers training courses for owners and animals who can learn in a group setting.

He offers all sorts of FUN activities, he says, including agility and tracking and 'Rally' obedience, a fun form of obedience training.

He also offers "PUPtastics," a course for puppies, limited to 3 to 6 puppies.

The course helps the handlers learn to read the puppies and help them be exposed to a variety of experience, such as going over different kinds of terrain like grass, and gravel – all the life skills they need to be well adjusted dogs.

"The most crucial period is from 2 to 4 months," Jim



A "happy bunch" at Spirit Ridge – Jim Tsitanidis with Malinois Belgian Shepherds Jese, Zorro and Tequila.

says. "People often discount this period. They treat puppies like human babies and don't expose them to as many people, dogs and experiences as they should."

Jim has some advice for owners who are struggling with their dog's behaviour. "If you're embarrassed by your dog, don't barricade your dog and yourself in your backyard," he says. "Get help because there is no substitute for a proper walk with your dog. If you find yourself making constant excuses for your dog's behaviour, you need help!"

If you and your dog would like some help, you can reach Spirit Ridge K9 Training and Rescue at www.spiritridge.net or 519 855-6962.