


Helping dogs, and people, in need


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Spirit Ridge K9 Training and Rescue owner Jim Tsitanidis -- accompanied by Zorro, a rescued eight-year old Belgian shepherd -- is helping people to understand their dogs.

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Ideally, Hillsburgh resident Jim Tsitanidis would like to see the Humane Society and SPCAs shut down. Not because they're doing a poor job, but because people will know how to handle their animals and won't feel it necessary to abuse or abandon them.

"They do a terrific job," he adds of the organizations, explaining he'd like to see all their animals rehabilitated and placed with loving homes.

The retired health economist "escaped" from Scarborough a couple years ago and moved to the rural area, where he started Spirit Ridge K9 Training and Rescue.

"We're not in a profit-making kind of business.... If, at some point, we can break even, we're happy," he says, noting fees collected through the training side of the operation are used to support rescue efforts.

So far, Tsitanidis and his wife, Suzanne Adams, have rescued nine dogs. They focus their rescue efforts on Belgian shepherds, as that's the breed they're most familiar with, but have also come to the aid of a German shepherd.

"They tend to be very high-energy, high-drive dogs. They're cute as puppies, but when they grow up, they become a challenge to people who don't know how to deal with them," he says of the Belgian breed.

"It's a long process because not only do we get them, but we rehabilitate them and then we have to find the right [home]," he says of rescued dogs. "We won't let these dogs go easily. We have to be convinced that it's a suitable home."

The couple learns about dogs in need of rescue through their connections in the canine world. Those same connections are used, in addition to the Internet, to place the animals once they're rehabilitated.

Of key importance to rehabilitation, he explains, is building a dog's confidence, which is where the training comes into play.

The rural property features an array of agility equipment, a penned obedience area and a field used to teach tracking skills.

For "top obedient" dogs, Tsitanidis is also certified to teach protection training, for police service dogs, for example.

"When they have a job to do, they feel a great deal of satisfaction -- it confidence-builds. They become a lot better adjusted socially, both canine socially and human socially," Tsitanidis says.

But there's more to it than just the dog.

"He actually teaches people to read their dogs, to understand what their dog is saying," adds Adams, an assistant trainer.

When it comes to handlers, the focus is on improving their leadership.

"I teach them that because a dog will listen to a leader. A dog will not follow someone they think is subservient to them, which is why many dogs pull on leashes and lead their handlers," Tsitanidis shares, adding people can learn a lot from their dog's body language and posture. "If you can read your dog, you can then find the best way to train your dog."

Unknowingly, he continues, people often encourage undesirable behaviours in their dogs through the actions they take, such as petting to soothe an anxious animal.

"Ignore the behaviours you don't want and reinforce the ones you love," he states emphatically.

Training classes are kept small -- no more than five dogs at a time -- so each animal can be fully observed and the handlers can receive individual attention.

"The worse the dogs, the better for me. I target people who are embarrassed by their dogs, afraid to take them out for walks," Tsitanidis says. "Those are the dogs I try to help people with, because if I can fix those people, not the dogs, the handlers, they won't go to the Humane Society or the SPCA."

To learn more about the rescue operation or training services, visit www.spiritridge.net or call 519-855-6962.