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GOODHUE / DOG THERAPY

'Gretel' headlines program

160-pound Great Dane works with the disabled

By Brett Boese

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RED WING — People are constantly pulling on her ears, tugging on her tail and playing with her flapping gums. Gretel, a 160-pound Great Dane, has endured it all for six years without flinching or snapping even once.

That docile personality allowed her to become the most recent dog in Goodhue County licensed with Therapy Dogs International, a program started in 1976 in New Jersey. There are currently 662 licensed handlers in Minnesota and more than 24,000 across the country, according to Therapy Dogs International President Ursula Kemp.

Gretel, however, comes with a few quirks all her own.

The family pet of the Dudley family in Vasa, Minn., actually has two licensed handlers. Char Dudley, a former employee at the Red Wing Health Center, and her 13-year-old daughter Inga Dudley are both qualified to take Gretel into therapy situations. Most animals are one of many in a handler's cadre, rather than one having multiple trainers.

The training began years ago in Inga's 4-H classes, where the young girl met resistance to working with a dog so much larger than she was at the time. She endured the growing pains and now has much bigger goals in mind.

"My daughter's dream is to take (Gretel) up to the Gillette Children's Hospital," Char Dudley said.

For now, the family's sights are set a little lower.

Char Dudley has been taking the Great Dane to ProAct in Red Wing



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Ben Johnson works with therapy dog Gretel on Friday at ProAct, Inc. in Red Wing while Gretel's owner Char Dudley looks on. Gretel, a 160-pound Great Dane, became a certified therapy dog in July and visits ProAct every Friday to work with disabled patients.

since it was licensed on July 18. ProAct is an organization that serves about 275 people with disabilities, providing employment and offering classes that focus on self-sufficiency.

Ten have signed up for individual work with Char and Gretel each Friday, but almost all light up when they see Gretel enter the building.

Many have even learned that the Great Dane is leery of men in hats. They've started leaving their head-

gear behind when they come to.

"Today was really hard because everyone really wanted to pile on her like 'Gretel's here!'" Char said during last Tuesday's impromptu visit.

Not everyone was as excited by the project. Sally Ogren, ProAct's program manager, doesn't consider herself a dog person. The idea of such a large canine — the identification bandana wasn't even large enough to tie around Gretel's neck

— working with the physically and mentally handicapped set off Ogren's warning bells.

It wasn't until she saw the dog interact with her clients that she became a convert.

"I don't have to worry about the things I usually worry about — people getting bit or jumped on," she said. "What makes her special is she's so well-trained. She's docile and predictable, which is what we want."

Gretel and the Dudleys are waiting to get their background check back in order to start making hospice visits in Goodhue County. Inga is also looking into starting a local chapter of the Children Reading to Dogs Program.

That's all music to Kemp's ears. "There is so much to learn with how much dogs can bring to people," said the Therapy Dogs International president. "It's something you can't measure."