

Published: Sunday, March 18, 2007

Warm-hearted sled dog has new calling

By Julie Muhlstein
Herald Columnist

As a kid, Debbie Clymer was hooked on the 1950s TV series "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon."

She loved the wild adventures of the do-good Mountie and his loyal dog, Yukon King. She came to love the history of the Klondike gold rush, which caused a stampede north to Canada's Yukon Territory in the late 1890s.

"I used to think ... someday. I wanted the real experience," the Stanwood-area woman said. In February 2006, she got her wish.

"I got off an airplane and into a sled. Six dogs can really pull," said Clymer, 56, a speech therapist at Hawthorne Elementary School in Everett.

From Eagle, Alaska, near the Yukon Territory border, Clymer rode a dog sled on a 10-day, 200-mile loop over two mountain peaks. The journey fulfilled a dream and brought a great new friend into Clymer's life.

"He slept snuggled up with me every night of the trip," she said.

The sled dog that so warmly greeted Clymer in his world is now right at home in hers. Piper, a 4-year-old, 70-pound Alaskan husky - a mixed breed used by dog mushers - happily traded his old job for a new one at Clymer's side.

Clymer said she arranged her sled trip through Matt Emslie, "who lives three hours from anybody on the Yukon River with 12 dogs."

"Matt wanted dogs that really worked. Piper preferred people," said Clymer. "Matt kept saying, 'Do you want him?'"

She did, indeed. Two months after Clymer's trip, Emslie flew with Piper from Fairbanks to Anchorage and on to Seattle. Clymer was at the airport to greet her new pet.

After extensive training through Pet Partners, a program of the Bellevue-based Delta Society, Piper is now a certified therapy animal. While not service dogs, therapy animals visit hospitals, nursing homes, schools and other settings.

The Delta Society, also involved in service animal training, evaluates Pet Partners dogs for safety and social skills. Piper was a natural, Clymer said. While capable of pulling 600 pounds, Clymer's dog immediately walked at her side.

"He's highly motivated by treats," she said.

Thursday, Piper was on duty as a volunteer visitor at Providence Everett Medical Center's Colby campus. With Clymer in tow, and wearing a jaunty green scarf, the dog stopped by several rooms, giving patients the chance to pet a pooch and feel a bit more at home.

"I love dogs," said Donna Pioli, 63, of Snohomish, who'd been in and out of the hospital over the past few weeks. Sitting up in bed to give Piper a scratch, Pioli said she missed her own dog, a rat terrier named Rocky.



Dan Bates / The Herald

From her bed at Providence Everett Medical Center last week, Holly Mackey, 90, strokes Piper, a former sled dog.

Hearing Piper's story, Pioli expressed her interest in the Iditarod sled dog race, and particularly in the late Susan Butcher, a four-time winner of the legendary 1,150-mile race. On Tuesday, musher Lance Mackey was first to finish this year's Iditarod.

Ann Pearce, a communications specialist at the hospital, said she's seen a stroke patient move an arm in response to a visiting animal. "Lots of them have dogs and cats at home," Pearce said.

Ninety-year-old Holly Mackey of Everett was happy to see Piper, but was really missing Leona, her cat.

Piper was a welcome distraction for patient Brenda Eckley, 40, of Arlington. At home were her three dogs, a Labrador-Rottweiler mix, a Pomeranian and a pug.

A helper at heart, Clymer works with preschoolers at Hawthorne. She's now in training to be a hospice volunteer and hopes to include Piper in service to the dying.

And once again, adventure beckons. Clymer has traveled to Egypt, Siberia, Mongolia, the Andes mountains and the Amazon River. This summer, she plans to retrace the steps of gold seekers, from Skagway, Alaska, over the Chilkoot Pass to the Yukon River. The pass was once known as the "golden staircase."

It's not treasure she's seeking.

"When I cross one adventure off my list, I find 10 more," Clymer said.

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