**The Willow Award Nomination**

*Imagine* for a moment, if you will, what it would be like to be unable to speak words that people recognize. *Think* what your life would be like if the nerves or anxiety you feel upon walking into the show ring were magnified a hundred times over, so much that you could not even walk into the show site. *Feel* the hurt of being bullied, be it name calling or physical and emotional threats, just for being differently abled than your peers.

People with developmental or intellectual disabilities experience all of this, and more. Knowing how a special dog can become a lifeline, the founders of CHAMPS (Coaches, Handlers, and Many Paws) set out to create a program where people with disabilities can come together in a safe and inclusive environment to learn how to work with dogs. What happened is nothing short of miraculous.

CHamps clients are the handlers. Each one has a disability such as autism, downs syndrome, cerebral palsy, and others. The CHamps Foundation, Inc., is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. The volunteer “coaches” are owners that share their dogs with the handlers each week in a group class. The dogs are trained by their owners, and many do other types of pet therapy. The AKC has recognized the CHamps Foundation program as a source of therapy dog hours for their titling program. Some CHamps handlers have pets of their own, while others may live in a group home, or assisted living where there are no pets.

Unlike most traditional pet therapy programs, in the CHamps program, the dogs are handled by another person. First working in a triad (coach, handler and dog), each CHamps handler learns how to do basic obedience skills such as sit, down, stay, come, walk on a loose leash, etc. They branch out to skills that include Rally, Agility, Drill Team, tricks and games. There is an annual competition in which everyone participates and gets a beautiful rosette.

*Week by week, we see the confidence of the clients and the dogs blossom. There is a moment – when the leash is transferred to the handler – and they run solo – that is breathtaking. In that moment, that client is a Dog Trainer. In that moment, the dog transfers his attention, respect, and affection to another. It brings a tear to the eye.*

It takes a special dog to be a CHamps dog. It’s not easy for a dog to learn to work with someone who may not speak, or can’t use hand signals like their owner does, or someone who walks very differently. Many of the CHamps are extremely tactile; they love to pet, hug, and kiss the dogs, which these great dogs learn to accept – and solicit!

It is with a great feeling of pride that I nominate two very special Whippets for the Willow award. I think their work at CHamps would greatly honor Willow.

“Team Whippet” as they are fondly known, consists of Keaton, Bunnygetter’s Celtic Firedance and Taylor, Shamasan’s Runaway Train .

Keaton is a gentle soul, who has a calming influence on his brother, as well as his CHamps handlers. His fur is soft, his muscles are strong and well defined. His eyes are kind and he readily offers himself to be petted. He has become accustomed to the energy level of the class and the handlers, and adapts extremely well when transitioning from small to large group activities. He is an old soul.

Taylor is full of joy. He is beautiful to look at, and he carries himself confidently. He is very puppy-like as he moves from perfect focus and attention on his handler to his social side.. “Here I am… pet me pet me pet me”, which elicits laughs from the kiddos. Many can relate to “A.D.D.”

Sometimes, a CHamps handler just needs to sit and pet a dog. A person with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) may become overwhelmed in the class setting, and have a meltdown. The Whippets are particularly good at remaining calm for petting, allowing the person to stroke and pet them as long as they need to. This helps resolve the meltdown, and can redirect self-stimulating behavior (such as drumming, tapping, or picking) to a more socially appropriate behavior – like petting the dog. The dogs seem to love this strategy.

One of the CHamps handlers in particular, is very bonded to Team Whippet. This young woman is amazing. She exudes confidence when she takes the leash. Recently, she and Taylor soloed on a challenging Rally course. She uses good voice (not always easy for these folks) and has learned that the Whippets respond very well when she changes from her serious voice to her praise voice. She will partner well with Taylor when the group presents a doggie Drill Team performance at a Special Olympics event.

One assignment recently given to the CHamps kids was to learn and present something informational about one breed of the CHamps dogs. This required them to stand and deliver their information to the entire group! With Keaton & Taylor at her side, their teammate confidently presented a lovely informational speech about Whippets. This is amazing! With the dogs at her side, she gave each a pat (and boldly told them each to Sit and Stay) she took a deep breath and nailed the presentation. The dogs nailed their sit/stay, too, by the way.

Many CHamps handlers are not graceful, and some have difficulty walking; needing to use a wheelchair, cane, walker, or a support person. Sometimes a tail or a paw may accidentally get stepped on. Keaton & Taylor have never reacted adversely to an accident like this. They forgive, and move over!

We, as dog enthusiasts, know first-hand the unconditional love we get from our pets. Therapy dogs are angels in fur coats sharing this unconditional love with others. Keaton & Taylor are outstanding examples of the magic of a dog’s love.

Proudly Nominated by Mary Green, co-founder, Champs Foundation, Inc.

Keaton, Bunnygetter’s Celtic Firedance is owned by Carrie D. Williams & Patty Ewing D.V.M.

Taylor, Shamasan Runaway Train is owned by Carrie D. Williams & Patty Ewing D.V.M. & Lorie A Crain & Samantha Honaker