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Faces of the UI: Researcher goes to dogs

BY ADAM SULLIVAN | MARCH 13, 2009 7:30 AM



Click here to view a photo slideshow of Bang and the dogs.

Kneeling down on the hardwood floor of her Coralville home, Linda Bang had her hands full: one hand on Jack's back and the other on Sam's.

"Come on, boys," she said on Tuesday evening to her two rowdy puppies. "Let's show Stacey how good we can be."

It was time for the mostly Labrador mutts' weekly home-school session. Stacey Pilling, a local dog trainer, has been working with the 14-week-old puppies for about two months.

Pilling — a medical-anthropology researcher at UI Hospitals and Clinics and the Iowa City Veterans Affairs Medical Center — also works part-time as an in-home dog trainer. She's only been in the Iowa City area for about a year, but she has more than 15 four-legged students.

Her history of dog training spans about 20 years. After high school, she spent four years in the Air Force training dogs for guard work, building searches, and search-and-rescue duties.

In addition to her military training and self-education, the 38-year-old said she is naturally at ease with animals.

"I had a good knack for it," she said. "It's kind of an innate thing I was born with ... I've always had dogs growing up and have had a good rapport with animals."

Since leaving the military, Pilling has worked as a prison guard, a substance-abuse counselor, and a part-time photographer. She has also earned bachelor's degrees in social science and anthropology as well as a master's degree in environmental policy. All the while, she has worked as a dog trainer on the side.

"I work 40 hours a week, and then I change my clothes and play with dogs," the Pennsylvania native said. "I really enjoy working with dogs and enjoy being really busy. It kind of fits my lifestyle." Pilling said there is no routine for dog training. All of her training is specific to the dog and the owner's goals.

And the cases vary widely. Sam and Jack, for instance, are working on not approaching the door when visitors arrive. Another dog Pilling works with, on the other hand, has a history of severe aggression; keeping that dog in line, she said, is a safety concern.

But she's optimistic about her ability to help the dog operate.

"I don't really believe there are that many dogs that are bad," Pilling said.

The biggest reward of dog training? She said she looks forward to the breakthrough moments when a dog picks up a new skill.

"I love working with dogs, obviously, but I have a pretty low tolerance for unobedient dogs, so when I see dogs that are really doing great, that's really rewarding," she said.

And Pilling's clients insist she has a knack for dealing with animals.

Bob Bang, Linda Bang's husband, said before the couple employed Pilling's skills, they were struggling with keeping the two rowdy K-9s in line. Since she began working with Sam and Jack, he said he's noticed the ease with which Pilling is able to handle the young pets.

"She'll come here and do a few commands, and immediately they're doing that stuff," he said. "Just the 'sitting' and 'down' commands, she can do that in a few minutes whereas we weren't quite as quick. She definitely has the technique with dogs."

While a full-time job and several training appointments each week can be a strain, Pilling manages to sneak in time for a few hobbies.

"I've very active. Weight lifting ... reading, photography," she said.

Hayden Smith, a friend and coworker at the VA, has known Pilling for almost a year.

"She is a fun and pleasant person. Very boisterous," he said. "If I had a dog, I would let her train it."