

Comfort Dogs

Console the Brokenhearted



PRESCOTT, AZ – Susie here – reporting from a small outpost in central Arizona about 100 miles north of Phoenix.

Communities in the Arizona High Desert – especially Prescott, Prescott Valley, Chino Valley, Yarnell and Peeples Valley – have been devastated by the loss of 19 firefighters and 100+ homes with the Granite Mountain Hotshots' Last Call on June 30, 2013.

The elite Hotshots sacrificed their lives performing their sworn duty to save life and property, when a sudden shift in summer storm winds turned deadly. While much needed rain pelted Prescott and surrounding drought-ridden areas, the monsoon winds suddenly changed direction on Yarnell Hill, trapping the firefighters. Caught with no safety zone, these heroes deployed their last resort tenting. They lost their lives saving their fellow man.



My friends and I were sent through Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) to comfort the heart-broken and shattered families, friends and communities bearing this tragedy.



At nine months old, I am the youngest of the Comfort Dogs LCC sent to Prescott on the Fourth of July 2013. We flew in from Illinois, Iowa and Nebraska with our handlers.

Like the firefighters, my Golden Retriever companions and I are a brotherhood dedicated to the service of others. We go where others dare not to offer a gentle nudge of encouragement and optimism. Our assistance does not require words. It's a dog's gift that just being there can do so much.

Humans are an interesting breed. They melt when they see us. Smiles come to their faces no matter the situation. Needy hands of all sizes and ages touch our soft bodies and find comfort in nature. We only have to "be", lying at the feet of our human handlers and waiting for the public to approach us. People cannot help it. They are drawn in. The door to healing opens.

Local organizations own and care for us. We are engaged daily in service to schools, rehabilitation centers, hospitals and similar places to bring our human friends messages of hope and comfort. Take my fellow dog, Gracie. She normally works at a pre-school in the Midwest. The little ones go to her



when they are having a bad day or just need a little encouragement that the world can be a safe place. The Yarnell Hill Fire was her first national emergency assignment.

One of the handlers, Sean from Nebraska, really captured my attention. Sean especially likes brightening the lives of children. Kneeling down at their level, he encourages them to experience



the love and comfort available through his charge, Moses. Sean's firefighter son, Nathan, joined him on this trip to Prescott and Yarnell.

Confidentially, I overheard our handlers talking with Prescott area volunteers about a local organization implementing a Comfort Dog program. The locals have become great supporters. So far, they have raised about \$7,000 of the \$12,000 needed to purchase a trained Comfort Dog for the Prescott area. It appears that their enthusiasm is catching.



Not to brag, but it's easy to see how this happens. We truly are adorable animals and our presence is non-threatening. We bring hurting people closer to open arms and healing. I cannot take credit for this. Nor can my human handlers. It truly is an honor to be a Comfort Dog – even one “in training.”

They tell me that we are chosen as puppies. The first test is that of the “dog in the hand” – (not to be confused with a bird. That's a different legend among the humans.) In our case, the human deciding our fate holds a Golden Retriever puppy in his or her palm to observe what happens. If the puppy does not squirm and seems adaptable when placed on its back, he or she is a candidate for the rigorous training program and Service Dog Certification.

While some therapy-type dogs are trained to work with one master, we go the extra step of being required to work with many handlers. It takes a special canine temperament to accomplish this, just as the right kind of people must be trained as handlers.

Going into a tragedy such as the aftermath of the Yarnell Hill Fire, our handlers make us available to anyone who needs comfort. In the Prescott area, we dropped by the Command Center working to contain the remain-



ing 10 percent of the approximate 8,000-acre wild-fire. We visited local fire stations, surviving families, a make-shift Memorial Wall on the fence surrounding the Hotshots' fire station, a senior living facility, a local pre-school, and even attended an annual parade celebrating the Fourth of July and The World's Oldest Rodeo at Prescott's historic Courthouse Plaza.

The very moving three-block Memorial Wall has been a gathering point for the communities' outpouring of love and support for their beloved firefighters, augmented by emergency response personnel from across the country sending condolences and ambassadors to honor the 19 fallen firefighters. Even the most self-contained surviving firefighters let their guard down just a little when we offer them our comforting presence.

They and all those we have served in Prescott and other disasters recognize that we are a living and breathing symbol of courage and survival. May our contributions to the well-being of humanity continue to be felt by one and all trapped in the clutches of trauma, loss and crisis.

