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Chester couple trains Rottweilers as therapy dogs

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BY CALEB M SOPTELEAN ON JULY 16, 2019

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Jayne Strawmyer and Bella (Radiant Snapshots)

Anyone who passes Jim and Jayme Strawmyer's house knows right away dogs live there. The couple's three Rottweilers — Angus, Sprout and Bella — are quick to let passersby know that this is their home. While the dogs may seem intimidating, they are anything but. Angus, the couple's 6-year-old male, is learning how to herd sheep and is in the process of earning his farm dog title.

Sprout, their youngest dog at 19 months, just passed his therapy dog test. Nine-year-old Bella, Angus's mother, is currently the couple's only female and "is the alpha of the household," Jayme said. In June, Bella officially retired as a therapy dog in the wake of a cancer diagnosis.

The couple's dogs "are our children," Jim said. Since their marriage in 1989, the couple hasn't gone longer than three months without a dog, specifically a Rottweiler.

"When we got married, I wanted a big dog because I had always had little dogs growing up," Jayme said. "Jim's dad had a Rottweiler, and we were attracted to the breed. I went and found the biggest Rottweiler I could."

The couple's first dog, Den, weighed 150 pounds. "There's not been any other breed for us since then, and we have always had at least two, sometimes as many as four."

Bella was the couple's first therapy dog. When Jayme was searching for an AKC Breeder of Merit, she found Renice Zimmerman. "She had puppies, and Angus's pedigree actually lined up with Den's," Jayme said. At the time, Jim had jokingly said he would take Bella, who wasn't for sale. They purchased Angus, Bella's puppy, and two years later, Bella joined her son in the Strawmyer household.

"Bella came therapy-dog tested," Jayme explained. A friendship blossomed between Jayme and Zimmerman. "She opened us up to it [working with therapy dogs]. We've done it ever since with Bella and now continue with Sprout."

In her tenure as a therapy dog, Bella has visited patients at the Medical College of Virginia, the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Hampton, and Tragedy Assistance Programs for Survivors. Recently, Zimmerman and Jayme were even invited to FBI headquarters in Chesapeake. "We were there for multiple hours providing therapy work for special agents," Jayme said.

Although Bella was involved with all the aforementioned groups, her specialty is children. "She has gone for the last three or four years to TAPS," Jayme said. "She goes to DC every Memorial Day weekend for their three-day event. She comes in contact with 500 to 600 children at that event. They pet her. She [lies]down. She instantly know she's supposed to [lie]down to be below their heads," Jayme said. "TAPS is a big one for us," Jim said. "It's only one time a year, but it's a big event."

Jayme recalled the year Bella walked in a Christmas parade. "She was walking along, pulling a cart," Jim said. "On the sidewalk was a family with a little girl. She petted Bella, and the dad couldn't believe it because she was scared of dogs. The girl's mother was very thankful for us for letting her pet her and get exposure to a dog."

While laying down and receiving pets all day might sound like a cushy job, according to Jayme, "When dogs do therapy work, they absorb the stress of those people. They need decompression time." When Bella returned from a day on the job or a multi-day event like TAPS, she needed time to take a nap and "get some love for herself," Jayme said.

Jayme and Jim agree that myriad misconceptions exist concerning Rottweilers. "People have this idea that they come out mean. They don't. People think they are destructive, but they just need a job. Rottweilers are working dogs. They need to work."

Jim added, "We've had Rottweilers for 30 years. They're big old teddy bears."

In 2015, Bella won the Anvil TRUE Award from the American Rottweiler Club. TRUE is an acronym for therapy, rescue, utility and education.

“She had to be nominated for special work. Hers was work with the military,” Jayme said. In addition to her many therapy dog certifications and the aforementioned award, “some of Bella’s puppies became show dogs. Two of her female puppies showed at Westminster.”

Leading up to her retirement last month, Bella “worked as a therapy dog for about seven years,” Jayme said. Zimmerman took Bella to the TAPS event in May, and “she called me and said, ‘Bella’s not acting right.’” After visits to multiple veterinarians, the couple learned that Bella has a large, cancerous mass buried deep in her chest. The potential for removal would require extensive exploratory surgery, including breaking Bella’s ribs. “There aren’t a lot of benefits to going through with the surgery,” Jayme said. The procedure offers only a slim chance of success and “wouldn’t increase Bella’s quality of life.” A sad smile passed over Jayme’s face when she added, “We’re gonna let the universe decide how long she has.”

Though Bella loved her work as a therapy dog, the couple decided to retire her after the diagnosis. “She will push herself to the limit,” Jim said, “but she doesn’t need to.”

Jayme explained that though Bella’s work seemed to fulfill her. “It’s stressful. When she comes home, she’s down for a couple days sometimes, and we don’t want her to go through that while she’s battling cancer.”

Until it’s time for Bella to move on, “she will live like a queen,” Jayme said. In her retirement, “she is gonna rule the house. She can do whatever she wants within reason.”

“She is a good ambassador for the breed,” Jim said. “People who see her get to see Rottweilers in a way they haven’t seen before. Because of their bad reputation, Rottweilers have to be two times as good just to prove they aren’t bad.”

As the conversation wound down, Jim looked down at Bella affectionately. “They don’t come better than her,” he said.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

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