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## LOCAL

# How a Lansing area nonprofit is changing lives by training service dogs



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## Key Points AI-assisted summary

Canines for Change, a nonprofit founded by Dr. Nikki Brown, breeds and trains service and facility dogs for individuals and organizations across Michigan.

The organization recently moved into a new 6,600-square-foot facility, allowing them to expand their training programs and offer services like summer camps and classes for the public.

The nonprofit teaches school staff how to work with facility dogs and collaborates with them to involve the dogs in everything from classroom lessons to counseling sessions, he said.

**DIMONDALE** — Tammy Nickerson owes her independence to her service dog, Nala. The 95-pound rottweiler has been anticipating Nickerson's needs for five years.

At her home near Mason, Nala fetches Nickerson the phone, picks up anything she drops and stands by her side when she falls. The 66-year-old is a double amputee with lung and stability issues who is outfitted with prosthetic legs and uses a wheelchair.

During a recent visit to the Mason Meijer store, Nala walked beside Nickerson to help with anything she dropped or couldn't reach.

And when Nickerson passes out, a frequent occurrence, Nala is trained to notify either her family, by pressing a button on a device Nickerson keeps near her, or

anyone else nearby by fetching them. Nala wears a patch that reads, "If I'm alone, that means my mom's down. Please follow me. My name is Nala."

Nala can sense when Nickerson needs to rest, when she's about to lose consciousness and has prevented an emergency "more times than I can count," Nickerson said. She's passed out in stores more than once. Every time it's happened Nala has sought help and led them back to Nickerson.

"I would not be living alone without her. She is truly, truly amazing."

Nala's training wouldn't have been possible without Canines for Change. Dr. Nikki Brown founded the local nonprofit that breeds and trains service and facility dogs nearly two decades ago in Grand Ledge.

A psychologist who worked in Lansing schools for more than 20 years, Brown started the organization in 2005 after witnessing the impact dogs have on children in the classroom.

In the years since the organization has grown from training a few service dogs each year to nearly a dozen and placing more than 60 trained facility dogs in approximately 50 schools, with kids' advocacy programs, and at 911 centers and police departments throughout the state since 2021.

After years of training and holding classes in a room at a Tractor Supply Co. store in Lansing, the nonprofit moved into its own facility this year, a \$1 million, 6,600-square-foot building on 6 acres off North Michigan Road. The facility serves as a training center, kennel and birthing site for dogs who will eventually be placed to assist individuals or work in schools or elsewhere.

The nonprofit's clients say the dogs trained by the nonprofit improve lives, and in some cases, are life-saving.

“You can’t understand it unless you’ve seen a service dog in action,” Nickerson said. “You just don’t know how they can change someone’s life.”

## **Learning skills, anticipating emergencies**

On a Monday morning in late February Andrea Rombach, a dog trainer with Canines for Change, sat on the floor inside the new facility’s training room. The sounds of several dogs barking from the building’s kennel filled the space but Rombach was focused on Diamond. She threw a ball across the room and the goldendoodle, now a year old, ran after it and brought it back to Rombach.

“Good girl,” Rombach said, before throwing the ball again.

Knowing how to retrieve things for someone is one of the skills Diamond needs to learn before she’s certified, Rombach said.

Every service dog in the nonprofit’s program learns three tasks. Those skills are often unique to the individual or group of people they will be assisting, she said.

“You may come to me and say, ‘I want my dog to know deep pressure therapy and I want my dog to press a button and I want my dog to go get help,’” Rombach said.

The nonprofit will focus on teaching those commands, she said. Service dogs can learn to detect blood sugar levels and an increasing heart rate through scent and other mannerisms. They can alert someone to signs of oncoming seizures and panic attacks.

“They can put all the pieces in order and think, ‘These are the 40 things that lead up to when mom falls and I have to help her,’” Rombach said.

But basic training always starts with socialization and re-enforcing good behavior, said Brown, executive director for Canines for Change.

Experienced trainers can recognize behaviors and personalities in puppies that indicate they would make good service or facility dogs but that doesn't mean dogs without those traits can't become wonderful service dogs too, she said.

"They have to be outgoing, but not the bully of the litter," Brown said. "There's a fine line there. You can take a puppy that may be a little shy, and, if you do all of the things correct with socializing and confidence building and a whole lot of training, they can end up just as good as a dog that was born with those traits already."

When Nala was a puppy, Canies for Change was the only local service dog organization that agreed to train her for Nickerson. Most other trainers told her the rottweiler wouldn't be easy to train, but Nickerson said she needed a large dog she could lean on after a fall.

When Brown met Nala she could see potential.

"She was picking up on scent, she was focused," Brown said. "She was a happy puppy. She was very calm. She was very curious about where Tammy was all the time and even at 10 weeks old, that's a huge thing."

Service and facility dogs, which typically cost between \$12,000 and \$15,000, go through up to 24 months of training. During that time they work with trainers, but also with the people they will assist. They train at the nonprofit's facility before they reach a year old.

"We start with our puppies very young," Brown said. "They have to come to class once a week, and now that we have a training facility, the puppies will come, as soon as they're all vaccinated, and spend a week at our facility during their puppy-raising stay, so that we can have our head trainers working with them as they're growing."

## 'Hope and love'

Nate Statly was in a coma, still in critical condition but recovering when his parents made a promise to get him a dog. A gunman shot him in the head on Michigan State University's campus on Feb. 13, 2023, injuring four others and killing three students.

Statly has wanted a dog since he was boy, his mother, Amy Statly, said.

"Tom and I made him a bedside promise that when he came home we'd get him a dog," she said.

Remi, a one-year-old Goldendoodle, will be so much more than a companion when she comes to live at the Statlys' home in Hartland full-time. Canines for Change is training her to retrieve items for Nate and alert him to curbs and roadblocks as he navigates the world with vision limitations. He's now blind in one eye and has mobility challenges.

Remi represents two things that are crucial in his continued recovery, Nate said.

"Hope," he said. "Hope and love."

Lewis, a facility dog at Mason High School, gives both in abundance when he works with students and staff, said Krista Sherman, a special education teacher. She's one of a handful of handlers at the school who cares for him.

Sherman said while Lewis is often part of classroom lessons the emotional support he offers students has been just as important to their education.

"We need to teach our students, but our kids are suffering mentally," she said.

"There's anxiety, depression at all levels. It's just been amazing to see what these dogs have done."

Canines for Change has trained facility dogs for school districts in East Lansing , Okemos, Portland, Grand Ledge, Mason and Charlotte, along with 911 centers in Eaton and Calhoun counties, said Gery Rehmann, a Canines for Change field representative who works with schools.

The nonprofit teaches school staff how to work with facility dogs and collaborates with them to involve the dogs in everything from classroom lessons to counseling sessions, he said.

“We have 64 facility dogs and we have 18 dogs for schools in training right now, and we have 46 teams that have been trained and certified since 2023,” Rehmann said. “It’s pretty impressive.”

## **Accommodating future needs**

It took three years for Canines for Change to work toward opening its own facility, Brown said.

The nonprofit did most of its training in a room inside a Tractor Supply Co. store off West Grand River Avenue for a decade. Staff includes three paid employees and about 20 involved volunteers.

The new facility was paid for in part with savings, fundraising, grant money and donations.

“We still have a \$500,000 mortgage,” Brown said, but she said without a designated facility the nonprofit would have ceased to exist. “We didn't have enough capacity for the number of dogs we needed.”

The new facility will be an added cost for the nonprofit, which had a \$438,138 budget in 2024, Brown said, but it will allow for more training and outreach too.

The organization now has a place for service dog training and puppy births but also somewhere to offer classes to the public, summer day camps and other programs, Brown said. Class fees will help support the nonprofit, she added.

“I have always wanted to have a kids camp in the summer to learn about dog training,” she said. “We can teach some social skills and some leadership skills and things like that with the dogs, for kids to do with their dog at home.”

The nonprofit will celebrate 20 years at a new home in May. An open house for the new facility will likely be held in June, though a date hasn't been set yet.

The organization will need more volunteers, Brown said, and while the facility allows for needed space and growth, Brown doesn't want the nonprofit to become too large.

“We are trying to stay on the smaller side and be more manageable and be able to give individual attention to the dogs once they get into the schools,” she said.

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