

PROJECT UNDERDOG: Local group helps find homes for hard-to-adopt pooches

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By Robert C. Pollack

BRANFORD — He wandered around a large, almost empty room at the Shoreline Pet Lodge at 157 Pine Orchard Road one recent weekday evening, prancing, his brown eyes bright, his black coat gleaming.

His name is Major and he had been abandoned by his former owner who had fallen on hard times and couldn't afford to keep him. But what made Major — a Labrador who despite being underfed for some time still weighed 60 pounds - different was that he had spent almost all his four years living in a backyard without any kind of training whatsoever or socialization.

He was not housebroken. He didn't know his name and didn't respond to commands, even simple ones. Sit. Shake hands. Lie down. Come. These were all beyond him. And because of his lack of training or close human companionship, though clearly affectionate and in no way threatening, he could tear up a house pretty good and kept jumping on people without any comprehension of what "no" means.

Enter Project Underdog, a new program dedicated to helping find homes for "hard to adopt dogs."

Jade Guiggio, a professional dog trainer for Polite Paws, LLC of Branford, has agreed to volunteer her time for one-on-one sessions with hard to place dogs.

Now, as Major kept wriggling, licking and jumping about without rhyme or reason, Guiggio began working with him, using a calm but firm voice and leading him through a series of commands she repeated over and over again.

Photographer Kathryn Schauer, another Project Underdog volunteer who loves animals, watched intently. Her job, after a hard to place dog is trained and groomed and ready for adoption, is to stage a photo shoot to capture the essence of the dog that hopefully will win over the heart of a prospective master. Photos she takes will be used to try to help place the dogs — and an 8-by-10 complimentary portrait will be provided to the family that agrees to adopt any Project Underdog animal.

Modern Dog of Madison has agreed to provide Guiggio with training treats and will give an adoptive family a new collar and ID tag.

Grooming will be provided by a Shoreline Pet Lodge grooming expert for "a complete makeover" including a bath, clipping and nail trim before the dog meets potential adoptive families. The lodge is also providing space for training sessions without charge.

But Major knew none of this. He looked up inquiringly at Guiggio, trying to understand her patient and repetitive commands.

Tim and Maggie Stevens watched the training session with more than a little interest. They had agreed to be Major's temporary foster parents though they have a Lab of their own. They called the experience "interesting and challenging."

"Without any training, he has tested us pretty good in the past two weeks," Tim Stevens said. "He can be a real handful — but he is fun loving and affectionate." Finding temporary homes for hard to place dogs until permanent ones can be found is the responsibility of [Labs4Rescue](#) based in Killingworth, an all volunteer organization that has found homes for thousands of Labradors from Maryland to Maine and works closely with Project Underdog.

Ann Hilchey, the adoption coordinator for [Labs4Rescue](#), described Major as "a dog who loves to run, is great in a car since he loves to ride, and is good with people and with other dogs as well." Now Major looked up at Guiggio and his ears shot straight up as she said the word "sit." Then, for the first time on command, he sat down — never taking his eyes off Guiggio. For that, he got a treat, a loving pat and loud applause. He was getting ready for a new owner.

By the time you read this, Major could have already been adopted. But if you have a dog you can no longer care for that can be described as "hard to adopt" or know of one, you should call your local animal shelter. Project Underdog is plugged into many of them and will take it from there.