

MEET NEMO



photo by Mark Rogers

*San Francisco
Unified Family Court's
Facility Dog*

Kathleen Guthrie Woods

San Francisco's Unified Family Court is a noisy, often extremely stressful environment for the people who work and appear there. But starting this past summer, tensions eased, thanks to the comforting presence of a new volunteer service provider named Nemo.



Nemo with his cohandlers, from left, Shelley Gottlieb and Cynthia Dragon, and Judge Nancy Davis, at Nemo's graduation in June in Santa Rosa

“I had a young man, twelve years old, who was really struggling,” says Jennifer Daly, a senior attorney at Legal Services for Children. Court dates were especially difficult for this young client, who expressed his anxiety by yelling and pacing in the hallway. That changed the day he met Nemo. “The whole thing shifted in four seconds,” says Daly. Nemo walked to court and stayed with the child through the hearing, which proceeded more smoothly than anyone could have anticipated. “He calmed down, was much more engaged, and was able to talk about difficult issues,” Daly says.

Meet Facility Dog Nemo IV, a black Labrador retriever who, according to his business card (yes, he has his own card) is “a courthouse dog who is available to bring comfort and support to foster children and their families in court.” Professionally trained by Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) in Santa Rosa, Nemo and his cohandlers, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) Shelley Gottlieb and Cynthia Dragon, are on call and on alert to assist where they’re needed.

On the Job

“Hello!” Gottlieb says with her bright smile to a girl who looks to be about eight. “This is Nemo. His whole job is to be here for kids.”

Nemo, accompanied at all times by one of his cohandlers, appears at the courthouse dressed for success: his vest (once that’s on, he’s on duty), a collar decorated with characters from the Disney/Pixar movie *Finding Nemo* (a graduation gift from the inmates who helped train him), and his own court ID card.

Gottlieb hands one of Nemo’s cards to the girl and sits on the floor, talking with the child at her level and gently encouraging her to engage with him. “Nemo was raised in jail,” she says, referring to the highly successful puppy-raising program at Crossroads Correctional Facility in Shelby, Montana, that partners with CCI. “He went to school for two years,” she says, to learn more than thirty

specialized commands. “Visit,” Gottlieb says, and he places his head in the girl’s lap. “Lap,” and his paws join his head. The girl visibly relaxes as she scoots closer and begins to pet a very patient and compliant Nemo.

When the family’s case is called into Judge Nancy Davis’s courtroom in Dependency Court, Nemo and Gottlieb follow. Court can be scary for children, or just really boring, and Nemo doesn’t discriminate. Once the child is seated, Gottlieb brings Nemo alongside her. “Nemo, lap.” He puts his head and paws on top of the girl’s lap; she lays her head on top of him and stretches her arm across his back. This day she isn’t being called upon, and as the proceedings continue around her, she slips to the floor to sit with Nemo. At the conclusion of the hearing, she thanks him with a hug around the neck and a kiss on his head.

Dogs like Nemo are bred and trained to be especially calm. “They’re not just pets,” says Dr. Celeste Walsen, executive director of Courthouse Dogs Foundation. “The judges want decorum in the court, and there are safety issues.” The handler always holds on to the leash. Where Nemo goes depends on the needs of each child. A handler might instruct Nemo to sit next to the child, commanding “Visit,” or walk him around so that he goes “Under” the table and lies at the child’s feet. In the hallway, Dragon occasionally engages people by having Nemo demonstrate some of his more complex commands, such as “Get and Give” to pick up a toy, pen, or even an iPhone. (“It gets a little wet,” Dragon cautions.) However, in court, Dragon says, “We make ourselves invisible.”

Beyond Dependency Court

Invisibility is an important trait that will come more into play as Nemo’s role expands, possibly into other settings. Annie Goodman of Law Office of Andrea Goodman serves on BASF’s Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS) Dependency Court Panel and she first observed a dog used for reducing the stress of testifying several years ago at the National Association for Children Conference. “They talked primarily about animals in an interviewing context, on the

stand or in a taped forensic interview about physical or emotional abuse,” she says. It’s often easier for children to speak to the animal than to a room full of adults. “For kids who were neglected or abused, parents may have told them not to share,” says Gottlieb, “and a child will talk to a dog because he knows the dog won’t tell.”

Nemo’s presence can also have a huge, positive influence on parents who are appearing before the court. “They are nervous, they feel threatened, because the government is involved in their lives,” says Goodman. “You see people come in ready to fight,” she says, “then they see Nemo, smile, and relax just a little bit.” For example, the father of the boy at the opening of this story benefitted from Nemo’s influence. “It’s hard for him to do what he needs to do when his son is so anxious,” says Daly. So when Nemo calms the child, the father is calmer, and everyone can focus on what needs to be done.

A Worthy Investment

It took more than three years to “find” Nemo. “I found out about the program in 2014 when an invitation went out to judges to meet the facilities dog working with the District Attorney’s Victim Witness Program,” Davis says, “and I thought ‘Dependency was made for this!’”

The first hurdle was finding someone to be the dog’s handler. “Who would care for the dog? How do we do this? Answer: CASA,” Davis says. CASA has been serving youth in foster care with one-on-one services for more than two decades, and Davis sensed this would be a good fit. She reached out to Renée Espinoza, executive director of San Francisco CASA, who immediately saw the potential.

With a team on board and cohandlers committed, Davis and CASA dove into a rigorous application process that can include six to seven months to complete multiple forms and interviews, plus one to two years on a waiting list. “The timeline was anything but certain,” says Davis, but everyone was optimistically patient, and it paid off. News of a potential match came in October 2016.



**"I WOULD LIKE TO SEE A COURTHOUSE
DOG IN ALL COURTHOUSES."**

— Judge Nancy Davis

Meanwhile, Nemo was undergoing his own rigorous program. Bred onsite, he spent his first eight weeks at CCI's National Headquarters and Northwest Region Training Center in Santa Rosa. (A nonprofit organization founded in 1975, CCI has additional training centers in Oceanside, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Orlando, Florida; Medford, New York; Delaware, Ohio; and Irving, Texas.) He then spent about a year and a half with inmates at Crossroads Correctional Facility who provided basic obedience training and socialization. Back at CCI, professional trainers made sure he mastered the advanced, specialized commands

he'd need on the job, and he was matched with his team. His cohandlers then joined him at CCI for two weeks of intensive training.

"It costs \$50,000 for CCI to breed, train, and raise a companion service dog," says Espinoza, which makes it that much more impressive that Nemo and all service dogs are provided free of charge. Ongoing support services for the team are included. "We see them on a regular basis, we're available via email and phone for training questions and advice," says Michelle Williams, CCI's public relations and marketing coordinator. "Teams are always welcome back, and if there are any problems, we're here to help."

While CCI remains the legal owner of its dogs until retirement (at which point they are offered for adoption), the CASA cohandlers provide everyday care, and it's an investment they take seriously. "The cost is relatively low," says Espinoza. "CASA established a \$20,000/year budget for vet costs, food, vitamins, and parking and transportation." Nemo lives with his lead handler,

Gottlieb, and each handler receives a small stipend. To ensure that he can work for a full ten years, extra care is taken to brush his teeth, trim his nails, and keep him in good health. "We can't give him treats," explains Dragon, "for he must maintain sixty-four pounds consistently because he will live longer. Instead, praise ('Good boy!') is his reward."

Inmates Benefit Too

One of the interesting aspects of the program is the impact created and felt by CCI's partnership with fourteen correctional facilities. "We've seen higher success rates in puppies raised in prisons because of the time that can be devoted to their training," says Williams. "They are so good with their commands!" Puppies raised in these environments are more likely to become an assistance dog than those raised in homes. "I also am a puppy raiser," Williams says, "but I work forty hours a week, and normal life stuff comes up."

CCI has also heard of reduced recidivism rates for the inmates who participate in the puppy-raising program. "Feedback from prisons is overwhelmingly positive, not only

for the inmates themselves, but also for the environment as a whole,” says Williams. She shares a letter from an inmate whose puppy successfully graduated and now serves a person with a disability: “My life was changed by the puppy I raised. Something about her touched me so deeply that it changed my heart and the way I behave now,” he wrote. “She taught me how to love. I poured my heart and soul into raising her, and I loved her as if she was one of my children. I am very proud of her.”

Ongoing Impact

While the focus now is learning how best to utilize Nemo’s and his handlers’ time, brainstorming on how the program might expand is happening. “I would like to see a courthouse dog in all courthouses,” Davis says. “I’d love to see a dog working in juvenile delinquency.” (Walsen had a prosecutor tell her some teenagers come to court early ... to see the dog.)

“My expectation was Nemo would have a positive effect, most especially on children and parents who were stressed and anxious,” says Davis, “and my hunch was that attorneys, courtroom staff, social workers, and myself would also benefit from his calming presence.” Walsen has seen this demonstrated in other courtrooms across the country. “It’s really easy to burn out, and (seeing a courthouse dog) makes it fun to go to work,” she says. Plus, “judges tell us attorneys behave better when a dog is in court. They don’t raise their voices as much, they are more respectful.”

Since its founding, CCI has graduated more than 5,000 teams, and more than 2,000 teams are active today. To learn more about CCI’s life-changing work, visit cci.org.

Kathleen Guthrie Woods is a dog-mama to Louie, a mischievous (and totally lovable) cattle dog who wouldn’t last a day in Nemo’s intensive training program.

REACH OUT TO NEMO

Per his business card, “Attorneys, social workers, families, and advocates can request Nemo’s presence during a variety of child welfare court proceedings when a little extra support would be helpful.” Email nemo@sfcasa.org for more information.



photo by Mark Rogers; courtesy of San Francisco CASA