

WAXHAW

Program links dogs, patients

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Charlie Petrizzo should probably be dead.

When he was five years old, Petrizzo was hit by a car, leaving the left side of his body paralyzed due to brain damage. Because he was so young, his brain cells healed and he regained mobility.

When he was 16, Petrizzo was painting a house using an aluminum fence. He moved the fence and it struck a live wire. The injury left him covered in third-degree burns and damaged muscle. Some of the muscle in his torso had to be removed due to extensive

damage.

He found solace in the company of animals.

"I always had an affinity toward animals," Petrizzo said. "I wanted a dog, but my dad was allergic to dogs."

When he was 12 or 13, his family got a Labrador mix.

"It was the company of that dog that kept me sane," Petrizzo said. "The unconditional love of that dog was important."

Petrizzo came to the Charlotte area to take a high-level banking position. He worked that job until 2005, when his mother died.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Charlie Petrizzo, founder of Project2Heal, interacts and trains a few of his labrador retrievers. The dogs will go on to become service dogs and skilled companion dogs.

SEE **DOGS/PAGE A4**

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

"I just kind of thought there was a greater purpose," Petrizzo said.

He and his wife decided to breed dogs. But they did not want to breed dogs for the sake of breeding them, aware of all the shelter dogs who also need homes.

"If we're going to breed them, let's make it for a reason. It has to have a great purpose," Petrizzo remembered telling his wife.

Project2Heal was born.

Petrizzo recalled some research he saw where one of the major service-dog organizations was having trouble training shelter dogs for service work. Only about one out of every 100 passed the rigorous training. The organization wrote to their donors explaining the research and saying they would not be able to use shelter dogs effectively.

"My thought

immediately was, that's the answer," Petrizzo said. "Let's do our research... let's not only find the best pedigrees in the world, but let's also develop a program."

Petrizzo wanted to train the dogs to be "prototypical" service candidates.

After a long vetting process, they were able to acquire a dog from a famous Labrador breeder, who still serves as a mentor.

"We've developed a program for puppies where they're enriched," Petrizzo said.

The program begins as early as two days old, when they start "early neurological stimulation," he explained.

"Our primary thing is to donate these dogs to service dog organizations," Petrizzo said.

They donate dogs to organizations throughout the country, who then train the puppies to work as

service dogs.

Petrizzo also assists local families from his facility in Waxhaw.

Local families with special needs children often may not need a full-fledged service dog. Instead, the children may benefit more from a skilled companion dog. Skilled companion dogs assist many people, but do not require the full credentials of a service dog.

"We'll train those dogs," Petrizzo said. "We do that for local families only."

Just as they donate the dogs to service organization, they also do not charge families for skilled companion dogs.

A few puppies from each litter may not have the focus to become a service dog. They are sold to a "qualified home" to help fund the breeding.

Petrizzo has numerous success stories from families with special needs children who have received

skilled companion dogs.

"We've never had a bad story," Petrizzo said.

Parents call him to say their children are more engaged, calmer, more expressive and in some instances the dogs have been used as a tool by therapists.

Often, children come to their facility to play with the dogs.

Petrizzo hopes to expand Project2Heal's operation. He plans to buy a piece of land in Waxhaw to build a facility for breeding, boarding and to help children with special needs.

"We want to create a place where families with children (who are terminally ill) or families with children with special needs can come," Petrizzo said. "It will be a place where we do, eventually, hopefully, acquire the volunteers to train full-fledged service dogs."

Especially as programs

for special needs children are cut, Petrizzo hopes the community can reach out.

"We do it out of the goodness of our hearts rather than money," Petrizzo said.

His story inspired a movie, "Charlie's scars," which gained national attention and won a few awards at film festivals. Petrizzo has also written a book.

They are hoping to distribute the film in the future.

Until then, he and his wife are searching for a perfect piece of land to build a facility.

"We want to stay here in Waxhaw," Petrizzo said. "Because we've already built a following, I don't want to go to Texas. I want to stay here. Waxhaw is the perfect place. We think that we're going to be able to build something very special here that's going to bring people in for the services here."