

## The Voice of Westminster Dog Show

**Meet David Frei, the man who gives the venerable dog show its voice.**

*Steve Dale*

David and Cherilyn moved to the Big Apple in 2002, when Frei was named director of media relations and media spokesperson for the AKC. However, he gave up that job when the opportunity to work full time at Westminster presented itself. "Being a part of Westminster is like being a part of history," he says. "This is my dream job."

Frei indeed uses his high-profile platform to affect change, promoting causes and organizations like animal-assisted therapy (his big, big love); Take the Lead (a non-profit foundation providing support for dog fanciers suffering from terminal disease or life-threatening illness); and the Delta Society (he's a board member).

Their Brittanys (Teigh and Belle) are Delta Pet Partner-certified, and very involved in AAT. When Dave goes to an AAT program, he's just a guy with a dog; the dog is the star. "I'm just an enabler at the end of the leash," he says.

One facility they go to is Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City. True animal-assisted therapy is goal-directed therapy, with a therapeutic milestone set by a medical professional. A goal for a stroke or gunshot victim might be to simply toss a ball. "That's one reason why it works," says Frei. "Of course, the dogs aren't judgmental about the person, or why the person is there, or that the person may be in a wheelchair."

Frei says, "On one occasion there were two young men about 20 years old on the other side of the room with a person I assumed was their mom. Teigh and I went over there, and the kid asked, 'Does your dog know any tricks?'

"One of the young men was obviously unable to move one of his arms very well, but somehow Teigh responded by running up to him and offering a 'high-five.' He was able to use that arm. It was quite a moment." Frei's voice cracks and he apologizes, saying, "When you do animal-assisted therapy, these sorts of stories happen all the time, though they still touch me."

Then he rattles off a few more. "I think we're only beginning to comprehend the good these dogs can do," he says. "I think dogs have their own spirituality, which we don't comprehend yet. I won't say dogs are smarter than we are, but I do believe they understand some things that we don't. If that's true, we can learn from them."

The 2005 commemorative Westminster poster helped fund a therapy dog program at Children's Hospital of New York. A similar poster raised \$50,000 in 2004 for the Animal Medical Center in New York.

"If David is your friend, he is a lifelong, faithful friend," says Cherilyn with a laugh. "That does sound a little like a dog, doesn't it?" That's the kind of friend we all want to have.

- More on Show Dogs -