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The Seattle Times SEATTLETIMES.COM

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Lend-Leash Program: Four-Legged Companions Protect Women On The Run

By Kay Kusumoto

Every time Kim Druliner heads out for a run in her North Seattle neighborhood, Rosie is at her side.

But it's more than a woman and her dog sharing the jogging trail. Rosie, a friendly pit bull, is Druliner's specially trained security guard.

There are 42 other dogs like Rosie around the country - all part of Project Safe Run, a nonprofit organization designed to give women the freedom to use the streets without constantly having to look over their shoulders.

Rosie lives with Druliner and was the first Project Safe Run dog in the state. But beginning this week, the program will be available in the Eastside.

Shelley Reecher, the Oregon woman who is founder and director of the program, will visit Bellevue, Redmond and Kirkland to talk about the organization and provide demonstrations of the dogs' skills.

Residents can also meet Buddy, a Great Dane and Washington's second Project Safe Run dog, who will live in Redmond in a chapter house, as the local branches of the organization are known. (Buddy will be replaced after a couple months by another dog who will fill in until the permanent chapter house dog - now a two-month-old puppy - is old enough to go to work.)

Buddy and his replacements will live with Chris Villani, an attorney and chapter-house director, who got involved in the program because he wanted to help minimize some of the dangers women runners face.

"I liked the idea of providing a service that allows women to take back what's been taken away," he said.

Under the Project Safe Run system, women who pay \$25 a month can call to reserve the dog at the chapter house, then pick it up and run, walk or hike. The program is designed specifically for women, though senior citizens of both sexes have been allowed to use the service in the past.

The roots of the organization grew out of Reecher's own fear and rage after she became fed up with countless crude comments from men as she ran past them - and after she survived a nightmare that changed her life.

In 1975, while walking home, Reecher, then 22, was raped in broad daylight by four men in a Portland, Ore., suburb.

The experience didn't stop her from running, but it did change her exercise habits. Afraid of running alone, Reecher tried going with friends, but soon realized they weren't always dependable running companions. That's when she found Jake, a Doberman pinscher she trained as a defensive dog and running partner.

As a defensive dog, Jake could not be turned against the woman he protected, and was not considered an attack dog. Instead, he was trained to match an assailant's aggression by growling, barking and baring his teeth. He would not bite unless instructed to do so by the handler. Jake eventually became the model for all Project Safe Run dogs.



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Before long, Reecher's friends wanted to run with Jake, and she realized one dog wasn't enough. By the time she officially launched Project Safe Run in 1981, Reecher had 12 Dobermans living inside her one-bedroom apartment.

People started calling her "The Dog Lady" and "Doberwoman," and Reecher liked it.

"Women I didn't even know were calling me and saying they heard that I had these dogs available to run with," she said. "It was amazing how many people this was helping."

DOGS ARE DONATED

Reecher has paid for most of the program's costs herself.

She and her other business, which provides guard-dog training, pay for the veterinarian bills, liability insurance and special dog packs that display the Project Safe Run logo and carry the runner's keys, wallet, phone numbers and a pooper scooper.

Money from the user fee helps pay for program brochures. The organization does no advertising. All program workers, including Reecher, are unpaid volunteers; all dogs are donated.

The program also has a perfect record of no accidental bites and no attempted assaults in 10,600 runs, Reecher said.

"And I hope they never have to bite anyone," Reecher said. "If me running with a dog will give someone a second thought about doing anything to me, then good."

Reecher believes the size and the reputation of certain breeds of dogs used in the program act as a visual deterrent to crime. Breeds most commonly used are Dobermans, German shepherds, Rottweilers, pit bulls and Great Danes.

More dogs are needed to meet the growing demand. There are currently 100 Project Safe Run canine candidates awaiting training - all of which is done by Reecher herself. But not all of them will pass the rigorous tests, which include biting on command and refusing any food that isn't put into the dog's bowl at home.

She's also hoping to find corporate sponsors and a permanent home to train the dogs and help the program continue to grow.

TRYING TO GROW

Villani believes the program could also use more women to get the message of Project Safe Run across.

He's talking about encouraging women's groups, sororities and women's athletic teams to band together and open up more chapter houses and recruit volunteers.

Chapter-directors usually care for one dog, but in some cases have two. They are required to feed and maintain the dog as well as interview and provide dog-handling instructions for the women who want to use it.

Terri Ellis, a Wallingford resident and one of those women who has used Rosie, said the dog is a perfect companion.

Ellis, who ran from three to six miles three times a week before suffering an injury, said Rosie always kept up with her pace, never wandered off or ran into trouble with other dogs.

"Running with her was a great way to have more freedom and flexibility with my time," she said. "With Rosie, I could be running in the dark and not feel threatened. She gave me a sense of security." -----
----- Safe run

Project Safe Run demonstrations will be given this week:

-- Today: 3 p.m., Bellevue Women's Club, 10630 N.E. Eighth St., Suite 9, Bellevue.



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-- Tomorrow: 3 p.m., Seattle Club, 800 Bellevue Way N.E., Suite 200, Bellevue; and 6:30 p.m., Cambrian Apartments, 15606 N.E. 40th St., Building Z, Redmond.

-- Thursday: 11 a.m., Gold's Gym, 10600 N.E. 68th St., Kirkland; and 6:30 p.m., Northwest Women's Health Club, 14725 Aurora North, Seattle.

For more information about Project Safe Run, call chapter-house directors Chris Villani in Redmond at 882-0821 or Kim Druliner in Seattle at 784-1592. People can also call Pat Lake or Shelley Reecher at 503-345-8086, or write Project Safe Run, P.O. Box 22234, Eugene, Ore. 97402.

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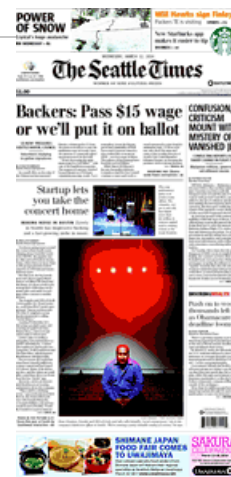
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