

## MEDIC Interview with KC and Thor (Thanks to MEDIC for this great interview!)

- You
  - How long have you been training therapy dogs?
    - Thor is my first therapy dog. We have been working on this for over 2 years. COVID19 caused a little hiccup in our final certification. Prior to Thor, we have a SAR/USAR dog and a sheep dog.
  - What does training a therapy dog involve?
    - Most of the training is for the handler, the therapy dogs are usually naturals. The dogs have to have the personality foundation for therapy work, such as friendliness, wanting to be around all types of people, loves attention, patient, and depending on the type of therapy, very calm.
    - Thor initially started off doing agility. I thought it would be great to run a course together. He had other ideas. He learned agility quickly and at 10 months was running his first course. The eye-opener was the fact he would run the course, then prefer to go and hang out with the audience or other people at training. So we started training towards our Canine Good Citizen (AKC CGC) certificate and everyone kept mentioning how great a therapy dog he would make. And here we are.
    - Most of the training is getting the therapy dog socialized and exposed to different elements. For example, being around wheelchair, or someone who may not have strong control of their extremities who may pet the dog differently than you or me. Also, sounds and smells, especially smells. The dog's olfactory is so much more intense and stronger than ours, that a smell we may not even notice, can be very distracting to a dog. And of course, being around other dogs. Thor loves to play with other dogs, and voices his opinion when he is not allowed to. This is one of the areas we still continue to work on. That is another thing, training is never done. Just like it is for CMED or the field crews, recertification and on-going training is a must in order to continue to have strong knowledge and skills in the area.
    - Thor is for first responders and other healthcare workers. The reason we geared his training more towards that than what other therapy dogs may do, is that he is generally a happy guy. He loves to lick and give hugs. He would rather run from person to person than lay around. Children hospital therapy dogs need to be happy too, but they need to have more of a calm demeanor and no licking or hugging as it may hurt the child.
    - Thor is actually continuing on with his training and hoping to get certified in AKC CGC Urban and CGC Community, other therapy organizations as well such as Alliance Therapy dogs. This continuation is not just for the dogs, but is so important for the handler as well.
    - Another part of training is something that I had when I had our SAR/USAR dog, is dog behavior. It is so important for the handler to understand how to read the dog's body language and behavior. They cannot speak in our language to let us know when they don't feel well, they are stressed, they are uncertain and so forth. It is also important for the handler to understand this so if it is noticed that the dog is stressed or something has him/her spooked, it is the handler's responsibility to remove the dog from the situation. This protects the dog and anyone who may be around just in case. I do not believe Thor would ever hurt

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someone. But if he got spooked he could accidentally knock someone down (he isn't exactly a little guy), or not want to work, or whatever. Dogs are great best friends and therapy, but they are canines and tend to react on a more instinctual way than most of us humans. The handler is the dogs advocate as well as a peer support for the responders.

- The last part of training is more for the handler, though some of it may be mere exposure for the dog. The handler has to have an understanding of the human side of the work. The handler needs to be trained, have experience, or understand the audience they are supporting as a therapy dog team. For Thor and myself, it is healthcare and first responders. Having worked in EMS, both as a dispatcher and as a field crew member, I have personal experience and understanding of what others in the area go through. I have also had CISM (Critical Incident Stress Management) training, which is important in understanding how to assist either 1-1 or group defusings and debriefings. A handler can have the training, but they also should have the compassion and awareness of others to create a strong therapy dog team. A strong therapy dog team can be a wonderful asset and tool to peer support.

- What got you into doing it?

- I had already achieved my certification in 1-1 and group CISM. CISM support for first responders has been important to me throughout my career. It became even more important as awareness of losing several co-workers and hearing of other agencies losing people, to substance abuse and suicide. I was taking a class and another first responder from CFD was in there. We started talking about how it would be great to have the support directly for first responders. We started doing research and talking to other agencies across the U.S. Other agencies have started to either examine or implement the concept into their agencies. Having a handler that is or has been a first responder with a therapy dog strictly trained to be around other first responders as an extra tool to support first responders during incidents and critical stress moments was a key to opening up additional lines of communication and hopefully help more responders.

- Thor (Thor wanted to answer these himself)

- Why the name Thor?

- Well I really didn't have much of a say in my name, I sort of went with what my mom told me it was. I like it though. Thor in the movies that I have seen, is a pretty handsome guy, well built like me. In the Nordic mythology Thor tends to be more of a mankind champion and supporter, which I can relate to. I can't say

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it is because I like thunder though, that is definitely not for me.



- Are there any interesting/special commands Thor knows that we can learn to interact with him more?
  - I like to give hugs. All you have to do is pat your lap, or chest or stomach or shoulders and I will jump up on my back 2 legs and give you a big hug, along with some kisses. Another is rubbing my belly. Who does not love a great belly rub, am I right? Just tell me “show me your belly” and I will roll over and let you rub my belly. I also do other fun tricks like laying down, putting treats on my paws and telling me to leave it, until you tell me to take it, and then I will happily take the treats. I know spin and reverse, but you have to make sure my mom is paying attention. Otherwise we may get all tangled up in my leash and she is not that graceful, so I have to watch out for her.



- What other places do you two visit?
  - We have visited the Mecklenburg Emergency Operations Center during activation. We have visited CFD headquarters where I sat while mom was in a meeting with them. We have also gone to CISM classes at SPCC to talk about therapy dogs for first responders. We have gone to a debriefing with some first responders. I have gone to mom’s office to check it out once. That’s about it for work so far.

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- For fun we have gone to the mountains, gone on hikes with friends, gone to the beach in Nags Head, NC. I do like to go shopping too, Lowes is really my favorite place. So many smells and so many people, it is really cool and fun.



- What are some of Thor's favorite things? (toys, treats, places, activities, etc.?)
  - In case you can't tell, I really like treats. Any treats really are great. My favorite dog ones are string cheese, grillers, and turkey strips. Once and a while mom and dad let me lick and nibble on a grilled rib bone while they hold it for me, or a very little pasta with butter. Those are very special treats, but mmmmmm they are good!
  - My favorite toy is called a HurriK9. It is a really cool thing that has this soft circle that is placed on a thing that kind of looks like a sling shot. Mom pulls it back and shoots the soft circle and it spins and goes far. I of course must run and chase it down and bring it back. The other toy I like when I am feeling like I need a little bit more work out, is my pulling rings and playing tug and war with my mom, dad, or brother Loki. Sometimes my brother and I get to running around the yard and wrestling which is fun too.



- I love to go hiking, especially with friends. Zoe, Rob Graf's girl, is my favorite hiking partner, but I like going with Espresso and Axe too, zoe's brother and sister. My cousin Katie ( a chocolate lab) is my favorite playmate to visit and hang out with. We have been to the beach a few times and had a great time. I love, love to chase the waves and especially herd the sand crabs. Except one time at the beach, the little crab snapped my nose. I didn't lay my hammer down on him,

because I figured he wasn't too sure of me and was just being defensive. Still, it did not feel great.

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- How old is Thor and how long has he been in training?
  - I am 5 years old, but I don't feel like it. I have been in training it seems all my life. Which is between starting in agilities at 8 months and up until now, I have been going to some type of training class for 4 years total. I simply love to meet new people, new dogs, and new things, so classes are pretty cool to do.

