

Poor health forces dog to retire

By TONY PARKER
Pantagraph staff

PONTIAC — Losing a pet is often a traumatic experience for adults and children alike. But the loss is even greater when that pet helps accomplish everyday tasks.

Just ask Bill and June Miller, 725 W. Sherman St., Pontiac. The Millers' history-making Doberman pinscher, Duke, will be retired sometime next month because of health problems.

Duke, whose demonstration before the Illinois House of Representatives was instrumental in passing a 1983 law allowing support dogs in all public places, will be given away to a good home, June said yesterday. The Millers, both of whom suffer from cerebral palsy, are in the process of finding just such a home to avoid a second alternative — putting Illinois' first support dog to sleep.

The Millers are hoping to find that home before they get a new support dog, Lady, next month.

While Duke may suffer from arthritis and diabetes, June said he is still a good worker and pet, and she and her husband will miss him greatly.

"It's going to have to be somebody who will really love him ... this is a special dog, you just don't give him to anybody," she explains.

For four years, Duke, who is about 10 or 11 years old, has picked up the telephone, turned on lights, helped Bill walk and picked up dropped items for June, who is confined to a wheelchair.

But Duke has done more than that. "The most important thing Duke has helped us with is society. Instead of society looking at us as a disabled couple, since we got Duke people looked at us and have accepted us more," said June, who is president of the Illinois chapter of Support Dogs for the Handicapped.

"We didn't know exactly how many doors Duke was going to open for us, but our entire attitude

on life has changed because of Duke."

The 85-pound Doberman, who is affectionately called "Baby Duker," aided the Millers in getting support dog legislation passed and has performed more than 100 demonstrations of his unique talents throughout Central Illinois.

Aside from those accomplishments, Duke provided the Millers with four years of companionship and a lifetime of memories.

"The one thing that I will always remember Duke for is the first demonstration I did with him. He laid down and covered his ears (with his paws) as if to say, 'I don't want to hear this,'" she said.

While there is no doubt Duke will be missed, the Millers' new support dog, who is undergoing special training in Ohio, will be able to pull a grocery cart and open doors with doorknobs, in addition to Duke's repertoire of handy "tricks."

Retirement near



The Pantagraph LORI ANN COOK

June Miller, left, looked on as her husband, William "Bill" Miller, right, gave his support dog, Duke, a hug. The dog will be retired from his work of aiding the Millers because of ill health. Please see the story on next page.

