

Dog Scouts of America answer the call for community service

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Jacqueline Landreth, The Shorthorn staff (a UTA publication)

Alex, a young golden retriever, is one of the members of the Dallas-Fort Worth Dog Scouts of America.

According to its website, the mission of the [Dog Scouts of America](#) is “to improve the lives of dogs, their owners and society through humane education, positive training and community involvement.” The scouts are a national organization with a large troop in the Metroplex.

Alex’s owners, Cindy and Mart Ratliff, lead Dog Scout Troop 119, Lone Star Paws Squad. The Ratliffs got involved with the scouts after seeing a scout dog on the [Animal Planet](#) channel. After finding out there were no troops in the area, they started one in the Metroplex.

Now, the troop has just celebrated its 10-year anniversary. Cindy Ratliff laughingly said she is proud to see where the troop has gone. D-FW has the largest Dog Scouts troop in the nation, with about 80 to 90 members.

One of the human scouting aspects of dog scouts is badge-earning. Scout dogs get red bandanas and have uniforms to showcase their colorful badges. Alex has earned several badges, including ones for art and band. Those badges, Cindy Ratliff said, are designed to teach dogs to use body parts. The dogs are taught how to wave, use their paws, paint and use their noses to play musical instruments.



Alex, a golden retriever, and Quinn, a flat coated retriever mix, sit with the pictures they painted April 21 at the Cowtown Loves Animal Shelter Pets event in Fort Worth. Alex and Quinn learned to paint in their troop, Lone Star Paws Squad #119. (The Shorthorn: Stephanie Goddard)

As part of the badge-earning process, the D-FW troop participates in a national activity called the “Poop Troop Challenge” for the Clean Up America II badge.

“We challenge our members to pick up 50 bags of poop from public places,” Cindy Ratliff said, in order to model being a responsible dog owner.

Debra Payne and her two dogs, a Shih Tzu named Brindle and a Havanese named Dakota, participated. Payne jokes that most things with dogs “always go back to poop.” Still, she said it was “actually kind of fun.”

The D-FW Dog Scouts are more than badges, though. The troop focuses heavily on community service. They create dog gift baskets for people who participate in the Meals on Wheels program and who otherwise couldn’t afford pet supplies. The

scouts also give local fire departments special oxygen masks for pets. Since regular oxygen masks won’t fit pets, these devices can be life-saving.

Beyond the activities, the experience is about togetherness. Donna Dutkofski, a former UTA student, and her black retriever-mix Quinn have made many friends in the troop. It was like an “instant family,” she said.

Ratliff agreed, noting the members understand each other as well as the other’s deep love for their dogs, often in ways other people cannot.

For alumna Debra Payne, one of the best parts of the scouts is taking what she learned from her psychology degree and applying it to her dog. Both the scouts and her UTA psychology classes taught her “positive reinforcement” rather than harsh punishment, she said.



Donna Dutkofski, a former UTA student, helps her dog, Quinn, paint on April 21 at the Cowtown Loves Animal Shelter Pets event in Fort Worth. As a part of the Dallas-Fort Worth Dog Scouts of America, dogs earn merit badges by learning various behaviors and participating in different activities such as painting, camping and swimming. (The Shorthorn: Stephanie Goddard)



Dog troop leader Cindy Ratliff holds the canvas up while her dog, Alex, paints on April 21 at the Cowtown Loves Animal Shelter Pets event in Fort Worth. To be able to paint, dogs must know how to ‘shake’ and be able to tolerate having a mitt on their paw. (The Shorthorn: Stephanie Goddard)