

For the Love of Children and Man's Best Friend

By: Walter Sommerfelt

A few months ago, I shared with you an article I had written on Volunteers and my opinion that they are indeed the backbone of our sport. I received a few very positive responses from that message and one of them suggested that I should share my story to show that it was not just talk but to illustrate that when you think outside the box and explore that seemingly impossible thought with other forward-thinking people you can make a difference.

This is a true story about one man's idea of sharing his love of dogs and a desire to do something to help the Children of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. It shows how that idea with the help of a great group of people developed into a special event that left a small footprint on a city and a love for man's best friend.

The St. Jude Story;

This story started after I became involved in a volunteer effort for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. For those of you that may not know much about St. Jude's it all began with its founding by the entertainer Danny Thomas. It was founded on the premise that "no child should die in the dawn of life." The idea for the hospital was from a promise that Mr. Thomas had made to a saint many years before its founding. At the time Thomas was a struggling Catholic comedian trying to get a break in his career and living from paycheck to paycheck. When his first child was about to be born, he attended Mass in Detroit and put his last \$7.00 in the offering plate. He prayed to St. Jude Thaddeus (the catholic patron saint for lost causes) for a means to provide for his growing family. About a week later he obtained a gig that paid ten times what he placed in the offering plate. Following that Thomas believed in the power of prayer. He promised St. Jude Thaddeus that if the saint made him successful, he would one day build him a shrine. Years later, Thomas became an extremely successful TV star and comedian and built St. Jude Children's Research Hospital as a shrine to honor his promise to St. Jude Thaddeus.

In 1957 Danny Thomas who was a Lebanese American founded ALSAC (American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities) the organization which would help him realize his dream. ALSAC became the fund-raising arm of the future hospital.

The City of Memphis, Tennessee was chosen as the location for the project at the suggestion of Roman Catholic Cardinal Samuel Stritch a Tennessee native who had been a spiritual advisor to Mr. Thomas ever since presiding at Mr. Thomas's confirmation in Danny's boyhood home of Toledo, Ohio.

It should also be noted that although it was named in honor of Mr. Thomas's patron saint the hospital is not a Catholic hospital rather it is a secular institution not affiliated with any religious organization.

Five years after the founding of ALSAC Danny Thomas's dream was realized when in 1962 St. Jude opened. Since that opening, many discoveries at St. Jude have made possible numerous changes in the way that Doctors treat childhood cancer and other catastrophic diseases. The survival rates for acute lymphoblastic leukemia, the most common of all childhood cancers has grown from 4% in 1962 to 94% today. Also, since opening the survival rate from all childhood cancers has risen from 20% to 80%.

It is not hard to see what a wonderful tribute grew from that humble promise of a struggling young father to be. But I guess I need to get back to my story.

What can one person do?

After personally witnessing the daily miracles at St. Jude, I asked myself what could I do to help make a difference? As I thought about it, I considered my experience with the sport of dogs and wondered if that could be a source for a fund-raising event. My thoughts at the time were that our dogs are known as Man's best friend and I saw St. Jude as the best friend of a child in need and thought it could be a combination that might work.

Having been involved in dog shows since the early 1970's I was curious to why shows only held conformation and obedience together when there were so many other things that could be done with our dogs. I contemplated if there was an event that included the many diverse aspects of competition available to dog lovers would the public come to learn, observe and participate in our wonderful world of dogs?

With the support and encouragement of my wife and best friend Carol, I started putting together a plan of action and possibilities.

I had started my judging career in 1985 and had founded the Mid-South judges' group. We were one of the earlier judges' groups in the country at the time and met monthly to learn about the various breeds presented by knowledgeable breed mentors. Our members came from West Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Southwest Kentucky. At one of our monthly get-togethers, I mentioned my idea and asked for thoughts and feedback. Many thought it was a good idea but thought it had a very small chance to succeed. One member Sherry Webster thought it was a great idea and agreed to team up with Carol and me to pursue the idea further.

The spring of 1994 the project starts

By the spring of 1994 Myself, Carol and Sherry Webster had given the idea a great deal of thought. We considered what types of events, demonstrations, educational, and entertainment events to include, what all might be involved, and was it truly a realistic concept? At the time the AKC was still basically a Conformation, Obedience, and Field Trial club and we had this vision of so many other opportunities outside of AKC events in which dog owners could do so much more with their dogs. So, in May of 1994, we sent out a letter to a list of possible participants in our project to gauge interest in our concept.

On June 15th of that year, 13 individuals representing several of our concept groups attended that first planning meeting. In that meeting our agenda addressed,

- The general concept of the event
- Outline needs for individual subcommittees
- Location for the event
- Selection of a date
- Possible corporate sponsorship
- Introduction of Walter Sommerfelt and Sherry Webster as Chair and assistant chair for the event.
- Association with ALSAC and The Ladies of St. Jude auxiliary as St. Jude partners in the event.
- Finance
- Insurance
- Publicity
- Various exhibitions
- Special events
- Competitive events
- Demonstrations
- Major organization participants
- Breed participation
- Concessions
- Parking
- Equipment
- Gate/admission etc.

This initial meeting was met with great enthusiasm and all agreed to move forward with the plan. Everyone also agreed it would take at least one year to 18 months to put it all together but all in attendance were committed to the project.

It was understood from day one that we were all Volunteers and that no one would be compensated for their time and talents.

You win with people:

One of my favorite books is my wife's autographed copy of the late Woody Hayes book "You Win With People". Hayes the former head coach of my beloved Ohio State Buckeyes devoted the book to the team concept of how every single member of any successful organization plays an important part in the eventual outcome of any endeavor.

What I learned most through the process of putting this event on was Woody had it right. I needed to develop a leadership style that was open-minded not judgmental and appreciative of every single volunteer for it to succeed.

Sherry and I agreed we could not succeed by micro-managing and we had to let each group and individual event contribute and staff as needed. We as leaders would be there to assist and coordinate with them to make it all work as one event with each group as a sub-event.

Sherry was a very valuable assistant chairman and served the event well for several years before family health matters would force her to move over to the sidelines, the contributions she made to the project especially in the beginning were tremendous.

Getting the word out:

The committee wanted to put some type of name to the event and the title "**St. Jude Wonderful World of Dogs**" was selected, and Sherry created a wonderful logo of a child and dog to represent the project. Ironically just a few weeks before the event, we would learn the "wonderful world of dogs" had been copyrighted and we were in violation of copyright law putting our event in jeopardy. Fortunately, an agreement was reached along with a donation from the copyright holder and we could proceed but the following year we would change our name to the St. Jude Showcase of Dogs.

Also, we needed a way to share our event with potential groups and sponsors. I created a script for a video and Sherry with the cooperation of ALSAC and the AKC secured video material that Pro-Video in Memphis built into a 4-minute promotional video on our project.

After the creation of the Video Sherry and I started to attend meetings with many kennel clubs and groups in the general area. Our goal was to generate a diverse group with an interest in the project. We also sent the video out to every major dog food brand at the time looking for a title sponsor with some sort of financial support.

The general public:

Everyone on the committee felt that not only getting the general public to attend was essential but we needed to get them excited about it. We decided to allow the public to bring their dogs with them to the event so they could participate in some activities as well as learn about their breeds and their dogs from breeders and veterinarians and trainers that were participating

Finding a site and a date:

Securing a suitable site and date was next on our agenda. We researched available dates with little or no competition from other shows, knowing that this large undertaking would take a special site to accommodate it. We also researched the weather from the data available in the past 50 years.

The Agricenter International in suburban Germantown, Tennessee was selected as the site and the weekend of October 7 and 8 was selected for the date as history had shown it had only rained twice in 50 years on that weekend. The Agricenter was also adjacent to the Duck's Unlimited headquarters and some aspects of that property would fit with our project.

We still did not have a sponsor, but I signed the contracts to secure the site and I was now "all in" for sure as I did not want to lose everything if we failed.

The Agricenter was a unique property and the indoor set up was difficult to utilize efficiently but the outside had 300 full RV hook-ups, a wonderful pond and numerous large and small grassy areas where many events could be staged.

Title Sponsor named:

In January of 1995 Kal-Kan Pedigree, dog food company stepped up and agreed to become the first sponsor of our event. It was a big relief to all of us and a sign that we were on our way toward success

A true dog community project:

In our meetings and outreach, various groups started to come on board. One of particular significance was the Memphis and Shelby County Veterinary Association. This group with no less than 50 local veterinarians and their clinics committed to designing and staffing a "Noah's Ark" exhibit in which they created a mini-hospital to share with the public information and demonstrations on various veterinary practices regarding surgery, dentistry, ultrasound, physical exams, laboratory practices, preventive medicine radiology/X-rays and all things veterinary related. The Ark would become a great success as the general public had a real opportunity to get a behind the scenes look at the veterinary profession and how they treat their dogs.

The Memphis Obedience Club under the direction of AKC judge Howard Gladstein stepped up and agreed to sponsor the obedience side of the project and they would host a limited obedience trial as well as do numerous demonstrations to introduce Obedience to the spectators.

The Greater Shelby Kennel of which Carol, Sherry and I were charter members were hesitant to join on as a sponsor and move their show to the event but they did agree to hold sanctioned matches on the weekend to present the conformation side of the sport.

The American Kennel Club, The American Field, The Bird Dog Museum and the National Field Trial Championship all agreed to participate, and they would not only have a booth but would do bird dog demonstrations on the adjacent Duck's unlimited properties.

Agility and Lure coursing were not yet AKC events, but they were being held by other sanctioned organizations and they agreed to hold a full trial at the event. Numerous groups agreed to do demonstrations during the event some of them were, ***Pointing dogs, Retrievers, search and rescue, Schutzhund, herding, Guide dogs for the blind, therapy, freestyle and dancing dogs, drug and law enforcement dogs, fox hunting, beagle field trials, coon hounds and go to ground.***

Many of those that attended the event can remember our herding demonstration person using his border collies to herd a group of sheep throughout the grounds during the event.

The stars came out:

One member of our committee worked hard with a trainer in Hollywood to bring Gus the white Siberian Husky from the film Iron Will, The St. Bernard from the film Beethoven and the Golden Retriever Shadow from the film The Incredible Journey to Memphis and she created a show using the dogs that were presented on stage several times a day to entertain the public.

In conjunction with the film dogs, we began annual visits to the hospital itself to do the show for the children on the day before the event. At first, the dogs were not permitted inside the hospital because at that time the medical profession worried about possible infections and other risks to the patients but over the years there were many visits by canine celebrities like "Air Bud" and other TV and film dogs and it would eventually lead to a canine therapy group being allowed into the hospital as well as Ronald McDonald and Target house to soothe and comfort the children. I am happy to say I think our visits were instrumental in the eventual acceptance of therapy dogs not only at St. Jude

but also in many hospitals throughout the country.

One year the Golden Retriever Buddy from the "Air Bud" film performed and he had a very special impact on everyone as Bud himself was also undergoing cancer treatment at the time. Many patients that year were especially moved with their interaction with this very special canine.

Other Contests:

We annually invited several elementary schools to participate in a St. Jude Showcase of Dogs art contest and these kids did a fantastic job with their art with the winning art used on the annual event T-Shirts. Also, all the submitted art was put on display for everyone to enjoy.

There was another special event we had that was open to all including the public. We called it "Super Dog" and it was a fun competition judged by local celebrities and others. At the first event, Jim Deringer from the AKC served as one of the judges. Super Dog was made up of events such as "Bag your dog" which dog would sit still the longest with a paper shopping bag on its head. "Get in the car", which dog had the fastest time from the starting line to get in the adjacent car. "Call Your Dog" two owners hide behind a structure and bet on to whom the dog will come in the fastest time. "The Maze" releasing the dog into a maze and encouraging him through it with the fastest time. "Dress your dog", A race to a pile of human clothes where you would put a shirt and pants on your dog and run back to the finish line." The Obstacle Course" for both you and your dog fastest time wins. There were other events as well with each competitor earning points which when compiled the eventual winner was crowned "Super Dog."

Kiddie fun zone:

Since our event was about the children, we wanted to have an area where the kids could kick back and have fun. We talked about fair type rides but found the financial commitments and liabilities were high and decided on a kiddie fun zone where we had kids' games and various inflatables along with a small-scale rideable train to entertain and amuse children with their parents.

Breed Booths and Seminars:

I am not aware of any really large scale meet the breed type of events in 1994 but we decided that we would invite every AKC parent club in the country to participate by providing them with a free 10 x10 pipe and draped booth to present their breed to the general public, and to also offer them the opportunity to present their breed to judges and exhibitors in the form of breed seminars that would be provided free of charge to

potential judges considering judging their breed. This was at a time when there were very few seminars available in one place and way before the AKC institutes we have today.

That first event would feature over 60 individual breed seminars. AKC judge's Gary Doerge and Carol Sommerfelt, as well as other members of the Mid-South judges group, served as the hosts for the seminars and over the years many of the icons of various breeds would come to Memphis to present their breed at seminars where in most years between 75-100 judges would attend

In that first year, we also had 59 individual breed booths and 24 all-breed and other organization groups participate in getting their information out to the general public.

Adopting a policy:

There was no question that we were going outside the box when we decided to allow the general public to bring their dogs and that created many difficult issues with the AKC rules but we felt it was important to let the public bring their dogs. We had a very strict policy that during the event ***NO DOGS COULD BE SOLD, PLACED, ADOPTED OR TRADED***. It was emphasized to all the breeds and other groups that if people were interested, they could follow up with them after the event was over.

Flyball:

Probably no single event or demonstration over the years was as popular as Flyball. In the first year, we invited a group from Houston, Texas to come and do demonstrations and share their sport with the public. The general public fell in love with the sport and starting in year two of the event it became an annual tournament and when our event ended its run in 2009 the largest flyball tournament in North America was being held at the Showcase.

Other areas:

When putting on an event of this size there are so many small details that require attention and hard work. We had to find food vendors, and we needed to find a variety of regular vendors to buy space for us to have a chance to succeed and pay our bills. We also needed people in advertising print, tv, and radio to assist in the promotion of the event. We needed people to handle parking, ticket sales, set up and tear down, a convention supply company to provide pipe and drape for booths, AV equipment, tables, chairs, and many other items. We had to find catering companies to provide lunch for the workers and volunteers as well as security for the general public.

Press Conference:

By May of 1995, we were only five months away from seeing our project on display. In May of that year The Mayor of Memphis, The Shelby County Mayor, Executives from Pedigree and myself gathered on the steps of St. Jude Children's research hospital for a press conference to announce the inaugural event to the general public. This was an important landmark in our success as it became an alliance between the dog people, the local government and St. Jude to present our sport of pure-bred dogs to the public. Over the following 15 years, that proved to be a great alliance as no dog legislation was put into effect in the city or the county.

Volunteers:

There is no way an event like this takes place without volunteers. I estimate that annually we would have over 300 individuals volunteer in some way to make this show work. Many of our volunteers were not dog people but rather people that volunteered to further the mission of St. Jude.

Many people volunteered for that first event that would continue to volunteer every year throughout our successful run. These people were so vital to our continuity and success and I will always be grateful for their contributions.

Starting from year one Traci Mathews built a connection with a group of non-violent offenders to do their community service hours. Many of these individuals would often be the labor that helped us put up tents, cut grass, park cars, keep the area clean, staff numerous areas and do a lot to assist us. Jerry Pittman and I would start on the Monday before the event getting things set up and would be there on Monday after to put the Agricenter back the way it was.

Even after Carol and I relocated to Knoxville about 375 miles away in 2003 I would travel back for meetings as well as spend the week of the event from the Monday before to the Monday after getting things done.

Moving Forward:

In the following years, the Greater Shelby Kennel Club would become the host club and started to hold their point show in conjunction with the event. Later, the Tupelo Kennel Club of Mississippi would also partner with us to make it a four-day weekend event. When hiring their judging panels both clubs allowed for many of the newer judges to participate by offering them the opportunity to judge their provisional breeds.

Tim James and the Onofrio organization became a vital partner for the shows and the event in general. Especially in helping us to deal with difficult moments in dealing with AKC rules and regulations. Because of the rules, any area hosting an AKC event had to

be roped off with signage stating no unentered dogs were allowed past those signs into the areas where AKC designated events were being held. I can tell you from personal experience that most of the AKC people were understanding and helpful with the difficulties we faced. I will always be grateful to the late Dr. Robert Berndt a special friend and the AKC Chairman of the board at the time as well as the late Bill Bergum also an AKC board member for their support and guidance not only for the event but in dealing with AKC aspects and conflicts as they arose. While most of the folks at the AKC were supportive and understanding there were also a couple of individuals within the organization that at times made it very, very, difficult to put on the event.

The Pay Off:

From being told by many it could not be done, a tremendous group of volunteers and organizations worked together to make the initial show a success. Attendance that first year was estimated at over 25,000 people and after all the bills were paid the event was able to purchase a very special transport vehicle for The Children of St. Jude with a cost above \$37,000. The publicity from the event was extremely positive and all involved decided to make it an annual event.

Over the years the event would add and subtract events and adjust to changes within the sport.

The event would also hold Gala's in conjunction with the event and would offer individuals in some cases an opportunity to visit the Hospital. After visiting St. Jude some of those people were so moved that they made future bequests to the mission of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in their wills.

By the time our run ended in 2009, we had raised Hundreds of thousands of dollars for St. Jude. We had entertained several hundred thousand visitors to the event. Contained anti-canine legislation, while also introducing many new people to our sport and making a positive impact in our community.

Did we make a difference?

From 1995 until 2009 we put on a very special show. It was an event that I truly believe made a positive difference in our world of dogs. Since that first show, AKC has added agility, herding, rally, and recognizes so many titles that were not available in 1995. We've seen the AKC build the AKC Championship Show in Orlando into an event that has incorporated a lot of what we did way back in 1995. We now see "Meet the Breeds" being held not only by AKC in New York and other areas but that many local clubs are now incorporating it into their weekends.

We have all seen an increase in acknowledging our dogs as a vital part of society. There were two members of our Showcase committee that were in New York after 9/11 with their search and rescue group following the twin towers disaster. The Memphis area has created several therapy groups, some of the Kennel Clubs have adding herding and other events by recruiting people that had been involved in the event.

Ending of an ERA

We all know that over time the dynamics within clubs and groups experience change. After my relocation to Knoxville, I started to see a change within some of the organizations that were a part of the event. Eventually, some people within the various organizations felt that the event was a burden to their group and started to have a very negative effect on the overall mission of the event. What followed was a very difficult time in the treatment of many of the volunteers that had contributed so much over the years.

All things in society eventually experience change. So, for a variety of reasons, the St. Jude Showcase of Dogs ended its run in 2009. I imagine if the time and effort I had put into the event through those years had been put into advancing my judging career I could be an all-breed judge today. Rather I chose to pursue an idea and with the great help of so many people through the years I believe we accomplished what we set out to do. That was to raise money for the Kids at St. Jude and show the world the sport of dogs does indeed have a lot to offer.

In Closing:

All of us know eventually, there is a beginning and end to most things in life. The Showcase of dogs taught me a great deal about myself, about other people, and most importantly the value of volunteers and the ability to enjoy the experience of people working together outside of any personal agendas to achieve something for the greater good.

I would suggest that if you want to think outside the box if you have an idea that you think has benefits go for it. I know I did, and I am a better man for it.