

Elevating The Experience

By Sara Heesacker
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Nine years ago, our family attended our first NAVHDA training day. Like so many, the thrill of watching the incredible versatile dogs work that day grabbed us instantly. Without hesitation, the entire family jumped in with both feet. There was no way to know then how big a part of our lives NAVHDA would become!

Those first few years had challenging moments with two young daughters as they were the only kids that got dragged along with their parents. They got to play in the outdoors, get crazy dirty, and pet every dog that they got to meet! They hung out in playpens or with their little table and chairs under a tent drawing and playing while we were in the field with our first NAVHDA dog. The RMC NAVHDA chapter is truly an extended family to our daughters. Every spring I hear how much our girls have grown and chapter members hear about the tooth fairy coming the night before, or sit and listen to them prepare their 4-H demonstration speeches for State Competition. They rally around our girls when Jake and I are running dogs in a test or apprenticing to be judges.

Our girls know every dog at training days by name and what their handlers are working on that month. Over the years, the girls have become more involved in helping to train dogs and have found their own place in the chapter besides just being “the Heesacker girls.” From attending her first Aims and Rules Clinic to running her first NA puppy, our chapter family has supported and encouraged our oldest daughter Makenzie as she begins her own NAVHDA journey with her puppy Faith. Our youngest daughter Kaytlyn will be joining in on all the fun soon when she gets her first

puppy, and we know our members will support her just the same.

One of the first VHD magazines I ever read had an article by the Carters at the Yankee Chapter about the NAVHDA Apprentice Hunter Program. I was instantly drawn in by how they were able to draw youth, volunteers and dogs into an incredible outdoor adventure to truly influence the lives of youth. That article started a vision to create and cultivate a program in our chapter, and I am beyond thrilled to share the RMC NAVHDA Youth Program with all of you. Very early on, my daughters and I decided the youth needed a name. Their own identity. The Rocky Mountain Chapter’s slogan is “Dogs with Altitude,” so after throwing around some ideas, “Team Elevate” was the perfect fit. Those early years started out with a few other families bringing kids, and they would go off to build forts in the trees and play until parents came searching for them. We would hold a short youth training midday, finding retired NAVHDA dogs that were hanging out in cars to get kids working with dogs while parents were still out in the field.

Two years ago, at our annual board meeting, we moved some tables for the kids so they could hang out while we conducted the business meeting. When the meeting was at a break, I went over to chat with them and was quickly told that I was interrupting some very important discussions. To my amazement and delight, the eight kids sitting at that table had taken it upon themselves to elect their own Board of Directors, and they were in the process of outlining what they wanted to accomplish during the training season. It was at that moment I knew it was time to begin fleshing out the vision that existed for Team Elevate. We have done some



fantastic things with such an incredible group of kids. The chapter sponsored printing NAVHDA Youth Program t-shirts that the kids tie-dyed at one of our indoor training days, and they all wear them with such excitement to chapter events. The kids have also been selected as Judge Steward volunteers at every test we hold. They are 100% responsible for making sure the judges stay hydrated, fed and always laughing. Oh, the jokes, riddles and songs I have learned over the years from judges! (I can’t speak for all the kids, but I can promise every judge that has met my daughters is remembered with a story and a smile. You truly have left my girls with some incredible memories!) The kids take this job so seriously that most of the time you will see them running out to meet judges halfway in the field, and it has developed into a contest to see who can empty their arms first!

I can’t take full credit for what has been created. I was so excited when a wonderful mom, hunter, dog trainer, business owner and fantastic friend came on board with me this past year to help with the youth. With her enthusiasm, she has taken my original vision to new heights, and I am so incredibly thrilled that she has been elected as RMC NAVHDA’s first ever Director of Youth Development at the 2022 RMC NAVHDA Chapter Annual Meeting when we decided to officially create a board position around our youth program.

Megan Townsend, along with her team of incredible volunteers, has created an amazing experience for our



youth at training days. The kids get signed into Team Elevate in the mornings. Team Elevate has a full Youth Board of Directors: President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary, Director of Fundraising, Director of Media, and Director of Training. They spend time playing games and planning fundraising and activities. They have training opportunities with their dogs put on by the Youth Director of Training, who last year was my eight-year-old daughter, Kaytlyn. Adult volunteers join the day sharing their interests and talents. The kids learned about GPS and geocaching from last year’s chapter Vice President Tim Griffin, duck education by CSU Doctorate student and RMC chapter member Mike Johnson, and learned about bobcats from the Division of Wildlife Area Manager, just to name a few. Through some generous donations by chapter members and NAVHDA Judges, we have started a Youth Scholarship Fund as well as adding to the Team Elevate General Fundraising Fund. The youth have used their own funds to create



**THE FIRST YOUTH TRAINING DAY AT RMC, AND THE FIRST YOUTH LED BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING.
PHOTOS BY SARA HEESACKER**



and digitize their own exclusive Team Elevate RMC NAVHDA Logo that will be unveiled on their chapter gear for the first time this year.

Some of the great opportunities that are on the horizon for 2022 and beyond:

- Developing a junior marshal program at our tests where older youth can mentor with adult volunteers to step into assisting with field, water and parking lot marshal roles
- Demonstrations on bird and gun cleaning followed by bird and gun cleaning fundraisers available at training days for chapter members
- Holding the first Team Elevate family camping trip
- Selling field first aid kits and customized whistle lanyards
- Developing a mentorship program with chapter members to help the youth further their skills with their personal dogs

In the next few years, the RMC Youth Development Team has goals to establish a youth hunt in conjunction with another outdoor youth program to expose other kids to the world of versatile dogs. There are also plans to create a Youth Fun Test to allow youth that don't have the opportunity to test a dog to try their hand at some of the testing components.

With the creation of Team Elevate, RMC NAVHDA has seen a boost of fresh enthusiasm and excitement in our chapter. Entire families, moms and daughters, fathers and sons are making training days and testing days a priority, and it is encouraging them to get in the outdoors. It is so wonderful to see photos and updates of these youth going into the fields with their families

hunting during the wild bird season. Cultivating hunting dogs is truly becoming a family activity! We also see more of our youth training and testing their own dogs. Our chapter is so blessed to have an opportunity to speak in the lives of youth and have a fingerprint on the development of the next generation of outdoor loving men and women.

It can be easy to forget about the kids at training days. When there are only one or two families it can be challenging to justify developing a program for the kids. That was how we started...one family with two girls and a vision. It has grown and inspired so many even in its infancy. We are seeing more families and kids join the chapter because the opportunity is available. The effort may seem daunting, but it is so worth the time and dedication! I challenge other chapters to consider elevating the experience for the youth in your area. Both Megan and I can be reached through the Rocky Mountain NAVHDA website. We would be happy to support, encourage and collaborate with chapters seeking to start or looking to grow their youth program. What an opportunity we have to cultivate the next great dog trainer, breeder, veterinarian, hunter, and outdoor lover by providing them an opportunity to fall in love with a versatile dog! 🐾