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Canine Companions
for Independence



Truly special companions

By K. Castillo

A dog is often considered to be man's best friend. The same goes for boys, too. Six-year-old Marisa is a great companion for 10-year-old Jason Gackstetter, a very social boy who has cerebral palsy and gets around in a wheelchair. Marisa is Jason's canine companion, a half-Labrador, half-golden retriever mix.

Marisa is also considered a member of the Gackstetter family, joining Jason's parents, Tim and Nancy, his 13-year-old sister, Rachel, and her dog, Liza.

Jason is a fourth-grader at Skyline Elementary in Solana Beach. Many students don't always know how to approach him and his disability, but having Marisa as a companion makes all the difference.

"She really provides a bridge. She breaks the ice," says Nancy, who goes to the school each year to educate students about canine companions. She says the kids ask lots of questions and it's a great way to "remove the stigma of disability."

With Marisa as a companion, "Jason's not 'the kid in a wheelchair.' He's the kid with the cool dog," says Nancy.

Jason got Marisa through Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), a non-profit organization started in 1975 in Santa Rosa, Calif. that "breeds, raises and trains assistance dogs for people with physical and or developmental disabilities," says Katie Malatino, public relations coordinator for CCI's Oceanside facility.

From Puppy to Companion

Each year, CCI places 200 dogs nationally with disabled people who need help and companionship from an assistance dog. About 40 dogs are placed in the Southwest region, which includes San



Diego. The dogs are provided free of charge to recipients who are known as "graduates" within the CCI community.

Before a dog can be matched with a graduate, the puppy is extensively trained by volunteer puppy-raisers who work with the dogs from their birth to two years. The dogs learn basic commands like "sit" and "lie down;" and they learn socialization skills.

After that initial socialization and training, the dogs enter advanced training for

another six to nine months. Malatino says trainers need to be very committed. "It's a very intense program," she explained.

Following advanced training, the dogs are matched up with their potential graduate. CCI then trains the graduates for two weeks, showing them how to work with and care for their dog. Following the training, the dogs and their recipients formally graduate from the program in a public ceremony.

"It's an awesome, inspiring, emotional

Helpful hounds provide stellar service



BETH MALLON PHOTOGRAPHY

event,” said Malatino.

CCI trains three types of dogs to be canine companions: yellow Labs, black Labs and golden retrievers.

“Their temperaments are perfect,” says Malatino. “They have a natural desire to retrieve.”

Every semester, CCI trains 30 to 40 dogs. About 40 percent of the dogs don’t make it through the program. The dogs are still well-trained and sometimes go to service positions, such as working for



CHRIS KITTREDGE PHOTO, COURTESY OF CANINE COMPANIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE



KATIE MALATINO

Top left: Jason Gackstetter enjoys Marisa’s companionship, along with his sister Rachel and her dog, Liza. **Top:** CCI Breeder Dog, Adah, sits in front of her last litter: From left, the puppies are Flora, Frea, Falzone, and Flanagan. **Bottom:** CCI dogs learn tasks such as opening doors during extensive training.

AT LEAST THE
RUNWAY LOOKS
STUNNING



the Border Patrol. Another option is for puppy-raisers to keep these dogs as pets. For example, the Gackstetters' other dog, Liza, didn't finish the CCI program, but she did find a good home.

Commands

Graduates and their canine companions have a special relationship from the very beginning. "The dogs do bond really quickly," says Malatino. "It's in their nature. They're people dogs. They love people."

CCI dogs work in one of four areas: service teams helping people with practical tasks like opening doors and picking up objects; skilled companion teams help adults and children with social interaction; facility team dogs work within a professional setting with caregivers to help improve adult and children's emotional health; hearing teams assist graduates who have hearing loss. For example, a dog gets the graduate's attention when the phone rings, or if someone is behind them.

Retrieving is often an important job for an assistance dog, since they are often paired with graduates in wheelchairs. Some dogs turn lights on and off; pull manual wheelchairs; open and close drawers; pull laundry baskets and get bottled drinks out of the fridge.

Trainers and graduates can work on customized commands too, such as training the dog to push a panic button if the graduate falls out of his or her chair.

Graduates keep logs of their dogs' activities, problems, and successes. Trainers follow-up with graduates free of charge on a regular basis to make sure things are going well.

Work Life

Working canine companions can be recognized by the blue capes they wear while on duty. Puppies in training wear yellow capes.

While CCI dogs are approachable and friendly, touching or playing with the dog is not recommended. "We really need that dog to be focused on the job," says Malatino. "We discourage petting."

The work life of a canine companion typically lasts about eight years. Some dogs work for shorter periods of time because of their heavy workload, such as pulling a

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wheelchair.

“We go on an individual basis by individual jobs and health of the dog,” says Malatino.

After their years of service, companion dogs retire and become family pets, sometimes staying with a graduate’s family or going to live with someone the graduate knows.

Applying for a Companion

Potential graduates often find CCI online, or hear about the program from a doctor or a volunteer referral. Applicants must write an essay on why they want the dog and how they think the canine companion will benefit them. Next up, applicants are screened with a phone interview, followed by a home visit.

Once an applicant is accepted into the program, CCI tries to place the applicant with a dog within six months, but sometimes it takes more time.

“It can take longer because of the human-canine match,” says Malatino. “We really try to make that a lifetime relationship.”

Outreach

CCI is a non-profit, which is funded through private donations and fundraisers, such as the annual “Woofstock” festival and dog walk held each April.

Community partnerships help support CCI’s mission. In the past, CCI has created canine companion calendars with Major League Baseball teams such as the Padres, the Seattle Mariners and the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Lasting Impact

“All of our graduates are stars. They have amazing stories,” says Malatino. “A lot of times they have no idea how the dog will impact them until they get them home.”

That’s what happened when Jason Gackstetter got his companion Marisa. “At first we thought it (a canine companion) would be a good buddy for him,” said his mother, Nancy. “But it turned out to be way better than that.”

K. Castillo is a local freelance writer and a friend to dogs.

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