

FOR YOUNG WHEELERS
AHEAD OF THE CURVE

KIDS' EDITION

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KIDS ON WHEELS



SERVICE DOGS FOR KIDS

PLUS:

- Ask Alli
- Roll Models
- Young Actors

**BEING FAST,
BEING THE BEST**

The 2006 Junior Nationals

Contents



Features

FASTER, STRONGER, BETTER! page 12

This summer, Boston plays host to the 2006 Junior Nationals. Check out a few of the up-and-coming young wheelers who'll be there. By LAURA KAMINKER

FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS page 9

A trained service dog can be a great friend and helper — in more ways than one. By DOUG LATHROP

WHAT JULIE HEARD — CHAPTER 2 page 18

Julie tells her mom and best friend what she heard on the bus. Is she saving the school, or raising a false alarm? By LAURA KAMINKER



Departments

- THE DRIVER'S SEAT 2
- THE WHEEL WORLD 4
- ASK ALLI 6
- SPOTLIGHT 8
- TRY THIS! 22
- ROLL MODELS 23
- LAST LAUGH 24



Illustration by Doug Davis



Cover photo Courtesy of the Lakeshore Foundation

The Young Wheeler's Best Friend

By Doug Lathrop

Cristalee Hill lives in National City, California, and has cerebral palsy. Like many 12-year-olds who use wheelchairs, she often finds that people don't know how to act around her. They'll fidget, or even try to pretend she isn't there. They aren't necessarily trying to be mean. They act that way because all they see is her disability and they don't know how to respond to it. Cristalee is a little bit shy and has a very soft voice, so it's hard for her to make people feel at ease.

That all changes when her dog, Braden, is with her. Cristalee got Braden two years ago from Canine Companions for Independence, an organization that trains service dogs for people with disabilities. Braden has been taught to perform all kinds of tasks for Cristalee — to pick up things she has dropped on the floor, to open doors, even to wake her up in the morning when it's time to go to school. But Braden also helps her break the ice when she meets new people. Now, instead of being uncomfortable or ignoring her, they'll come up to Cristalee and ask about Braden. Having the dog to talk about lets them get past their own awkwardness and start a conversation with her. Then they find out they can treat her just like everyone else.

"I love Braden," Cristalee says. "He's my best friend."

You've probably seen a few service dogs, at the mall or at a park, working with their disabled owners. You might have wondered to yourself, "How can I get a dog like that?" No question, having a dog



Photo by Marc Balanky

"I love Braden ... He's my best friend." -Cristalee



who does things for you is very cool. They're fun to work with — and play with — and they can help you be a lot more independent. But service dogs are also a huge responsibility. In addition to feeding and grooming them every day, you need to make sure they get plenty of exercise, and to practice all the commands they have been taught.

Nevertheless, if you're ready to make those commitments, having a service dog can be greatly rewarding. Most kids who have them would tell you the same thing as Cristalee — they love their dogs, and their dogs enrich their lives in countless ways.

How Are Service Dogs Trained?

First, let's have a history lesson. [Don't worry — it's very short.] In the early 20th century, during World War I, many soldiers came home blinded from poison gas attacks. In response, schools were set up — first in Germany, then in the United States and Great Britain — to

train guide dogs to assist these visually-impaired veterans. Later on, dogs were also trained for people with hearing impairments. Finally, the same idea was extended to wheelchair users. Today there are dozens of organizations training service dogs all over the world.

Obviously, these aren't ordinary dogs. Lots of dogs are trained to do things like sit, stay and fetch, but service dogs are taught much more. They begin their training as early as possible, often when they are still very young puppies. By the time the dogs are ready to go to work, they are some of the best-trained dogs around. "Our dogs learn up to 50 commands," says Linda Valliant of Canine Companions for Independence.

What Can They Do?

A service dog can go wherever you go. Under laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, you have the right to bring your service dog into restaurants, movie theaters and many other places where animals normally aren't allowed. If you're a kid who has a lot of medical issues — like Cole Massie, age 8, from Los Angeles — your dog can even stay in the hospital room with you and keep you company during treatments.

"My favorite experience with my dog, Ilia, was when I went to the hospital for a three-day EEG," says Cole, who has cerebral palsy. "He lay on the bed with me the whole time. The only place I could go was to the bathroom because of the wires on my head. Ilia licked and kissed me and entertained me. When my head got itchy I wasn't allowed to scratch, so my mom told me to scratch Ilia instead. He loved it! It helped me so much."

Kyle Noble of Grove City, Ohio, is 7 years old and has had both legs amputated. His dog, Conrad, gives him lots of emotional support, in addition to the physical tasks he performs. "Conrad keeps Kyle company on the days he's too ill to get out of bed," says Kyle's mom, Donna. "He also pushes the button to open doors, picks up things we drop, and carries things between me and Kyle. He also brings the phone to Kyle and cuddles with him during painful procedures."

Like Cristalee, Kyle gets a real boost in his social life when he's out in public with the dog. "Conrad has given Kyle self-confidence and the determination to talk to people. Kids who used to stare and point at Kyle's lack of legs now come up and ask about the dog. Having Conrad offers Kyle the chance to make friends and educate people about disabilities."

"Ilia licked and kissed me and entertained me." -Cole

"Every kid in a wheelchair should have a dog like her."

- JASON

Just having a service dog, it seems, makes people want to get to know you. Jason Gackstetter of San Diego is another kid who's found that out. Jason got his dog, Marisa, two years ago. Since then, at school he's gone from being "the kid in the wheelchair" to "the kid with the cool dog." Other kids are always running up wanting to pet Marisa — though if she's working, Jason has to tell them not to, because being petted distracts her from her job. "I tell them to shake hands with her instead," he says. Shaking hands is one of the commands Marisa has learned — so she's practicing her training, while making new friends at the same time. "Every kid in a wheelchair should have a dog like her," says Jason.



How Can I Get One?

But before you start begging your parents to get you a service dog, there are a few things you should keep in mind. For one thing, these aren't just pets. Service dogs have highly specialized skills, and a lot of money and effort has gone into raising, training and caring for them. The people who have done all that work won't give away the dogs to just anyone.

If you and your parents apply for a service dog, you will undergo a series of interviews and then — because there are fewer dogs than people who want them — you'll be placed on a waiting list. Then, when your name comes up, you and your parents will be the ones who need training! Most organizations require you to take a detailed course in how to care for the dog and use the commands it has learned. These classes can last as long as two weeks. Then, and only then, will you be matched up with a dog.

Yes, it's hard work. But most kids don't regret it. Says Cristalee, "It was long, but it was lots of fun." For her and other kids, the work is a small price to pay for something that helps boost their self-esteem, and contributes so much to their independence.

"You should get a service dog," she says. "It will change your life."

More info about service dogs can be found in the parents' edition of *KIDS ON WHEELS*.

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