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PARENTS' EDITION

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KIDS ON WHEELS

SERVICE DOGS

Four-Legged
Empowerment



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COVER KID:
Cristalee Hill, age 12
Cover photo by
Marc Balanky

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Assistance Dogs: Four-Legged Empowerment

By Douglas Lathrop

The first thing you notice about these dogs is how well-behaved they all are. You would expect a room full of black labs and golden retrievers to provide a study in canine anarchy — running, jumping, chasing each other, filling the air with a din of barks, growls and yips. Here, however, most of the noise comes from the dogs' human companions. The dogs themselves remain relatively quiet and calm. When their owners or handlers — some wheelchair users, some ambulatory — get up and move, the dogs move with them, neither lagging behind nor leaping too far ahead. If a person comes toward them trying to maneuver his or her wheelchair through the crowd, the dogs stand up oh-so-casually and clear out of the way. The presence of all these toe- and tail-smashing wheels doesn't faze them at all.

It is a beautiful spring day in Oceanside, Calif. We are here to witness a graduation ceremony for Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), one of the largest and best-known organizations training service dogs. Today, about a dozen or so dogs are leaving their trainers — people who have been teaching and caring for them since they were puppies — to become assistants and companions to people with disabilities looking to lead more independent lives. The human halves of these "assistance teams," as CCI calls them, have also been thoroughly trained, undergoing a rigorous two-week course teaching them how to work with their dogs. As each trainer comes forward and presents the dog to its new partner, the dog invariably perks up its ears and wags its tail as though greeting an old friend. The bonding process has already begun.

As with most of CCI's graduations, the majority of human participants are adults with disabilities. But several teams also include children. While there are no exact figures on how many assistance dogs serve children with disabilities, CCI and

other service dog organizations agree that the number is growing. As parents of disabled children become better educated about available programs and services, more and more of them are seeing assistance dogs as a way of enhancing their kids' quality of life.



Cole Massie and his companion dog

Assistance and Support

In contrast to dogs that serve adults with disabilities, those that work for children are officially under the control of the child's

parents or guardian, who go through the training process and are certified by the organization as the dog's handler. (CCI refers to these as "skilled companion dogs" to distinguish them from the "service dogs" that assist adults.) The dogs perform tasks for kids very similar to those for adults — picking up dropped objects, turning on light switches, opening doors — but with an extra element of emotional support.

Cole Massie finds his dog, Ilia, a huge source of comfort during hospitalizations and unpleasant medical procedures. The 8-year-old from Los Angeles, who has cerebral palsy, takes Ilia to doctor's appointments and is allowed to keep him in the room during hospital stays. (Under federal and state disability-rights laws, people with service dogs are permitted to have them in restaurants, hospitals, airplanes and other public places normally off-limits to animals.) "Cole recently had to stay in the hospital for three solid days for an EEG," says his



Kyle Noble
and Conrad

mother, Michelle. "I truly don't know what we would have done if the dog hadn't been there. Cole had all these electrodes cemented to his scalp, and the staff warned us that they would get itchy. They started to itch, and Cole got upset and started to scratch them, and we were like, 'Scratch the dog! Scratch the dog instead.' Of course the dog thought this was a great idea."

For Donna Noble of Grove City, Ohio, whose son, Kyle, 7, is a bilateral amputee because of a complex 1 mitochondrial disorder, the comfort provided by their dog, Conrad, is just as important as the physical tasks he performs. "Conrad is first and foremost Kyle's best friend. He keeps him company on the days he is too ill to get out of bed," she says. "It's wonderful when Kyle has come home from surgery to have Conrad run to him and jump on the bed. Conrad just knows when Kyle needs him."

The Nobles received their dog from Assistance Dogs of America Inc. (ADA), which is close to their home in north-east Ohio. Chris Diefenthaler, ADA's executive director, says the organization considers the need for bonding and emotional support when placing a dog with a child. "Especially for kids ages 8 to 12, we look for

a dog that's playful — likes to retrieve a ball, likes to do things rather than just sit there. That's a stress reliever for dogs, just like for people." The interaction between dog and child also strengthens the bond between them, helping the dog recognize the child as an authority fig-



Cristalee Hill and Braden

Photo by Marc Balanky

ure, and solidifying the working relationship. "In the first 30 days the child becomes very important to the dog," Diefenthaler says.

Back to School

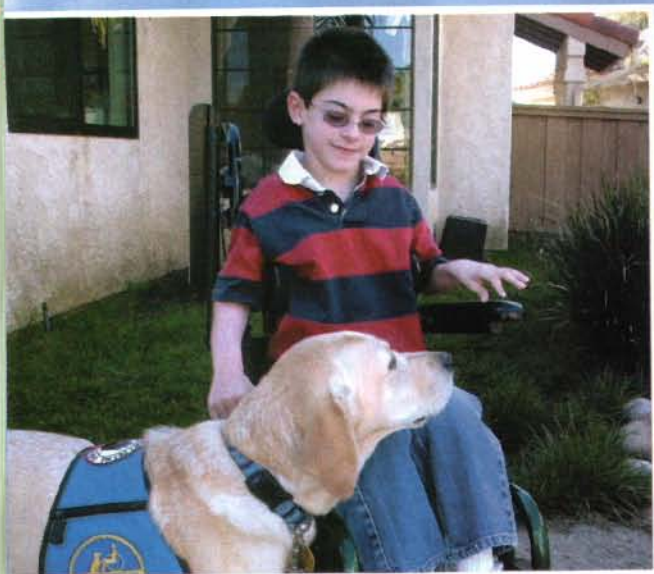
There is currently no formal certification process for service-dog organizations. In the United States alone there are dozens of them, ranging from large nationwide organizations like CCI to smaller operations that train and place dogs locally. While CCI breeds and raises its own dogs, ADA uses dogs donated by outside breeders and rescued from animal shelters. Still others train dogs supplied by clients. The service-dog umbrella group, Assistance Dogs International, maintains guidelines for its member organizations, governing the training of dogs and their human employers.

For families applying for service dogs, a typical training consists of up to two weeks of intensive classes, either at their own home or at the organization's facility. Families applying to larger organizations may also undergo detailed screening — including questionnaires, interviews and home visits — and be placed on a long waiting list. Although lists are generally shorter for kids than adults, families should still expect waits of a year or more.

Cristalee Hill has had her dog Braden for about two years. The 12-year-old from National City, Calif., who has cerebral palsy and lives with her grandparents, was originally placed on CCI's waiting list. Within two months, however, two applicants in the area had dropped out, and the Hills were offered a spot.

The training was extensive, says Cristalee's grandmother, Olivia: "The classes were eight hours a day for two weeks. Every day we took a written test. At the end of the two weeks we had to go to a shopping center and do all the commands in a public setting. Then we took another written test, to see what we really know about the program after all this."

Nancy Gackstetter of San Diego, whose 8-year-old son Jason received his dog Marisa just over a year ago, also describes CCI's training as rigorous. "They're obviously protective of their dogs — they put



Jason Gackstetter and Marisa

an awful lot of time and effort into training them," she says. "Once you really understand what you're getting, you can appreciate that."

Though neither Cristalee nor Jason were required to take the training — at CCI, the minimum age for certification is 15 — both Hill and Gackstetter believed it was important to include the children. On the other hand, Donna Noble brought Kyle to ADAI only when

he would be working directly with the dog. "I went to the morning sessions without him. That was the lecture part and Kyle never would have been able to sit still for four hours." Instead, she says, "he came in the afternoons and worked on commands with Conrad."

While the parent or guardian largely determines how much their child is involved in training, organizations encourage them to include the child to the fullest extent possible. "It depends on the child," says Diefenthaler of ADAI. "If the child is interested and can handle it, we want the child

involved. Kids ages 10 and up are almost always here the whole time."

An Aide, Not a Babysitter

Given the time and money (one estimate places the amount at \$30,000 per dog) that an organization spends on raising and training a service dog, these animals are obviously more than pets. Likewise, people

who bring service dogs into their lives must be prepared for even more responsibility than average pet owners. So how do parents know if a service dog is right for their child?

One good starting point is to understand what a service dog is not. "An assistance dog is not 'Lassie,'" says Michelle Woerner, training department coordinator for KSDS, a service dog organization based in Kansas. "While they can help in many situations, they cannot be relied upon to babysit. This is just too much responsibility to place on a dog. KSDS does not teach the dog aggression skills to protect a child, nor is the dog taught to 'herd' the child and make sure he or she stays in the yard."

Woerner suggests that parents ask themselves the following questions:

- Does my child truly want an assistance dog, or does he or she just want a pet?
- Do we want the child to have a dog just to lessen the workload for us?
- Can we as a family commit to the tremendous amount of work involved?
- Will the school system be supportive of my child receiving a dog?
- Is this right for my child?

Other factors parents should consider include the length of time they're willing to wait for a dog and the distance they can travel for training. A smaller organization may have a shorter waiting list — although, as with anything involving their children, parents should research the organization thoroughly before making any commitments. (A good place to begin is Assistance Dogs International, which offers a list of its member organizations on its Web site, included in "Resources" below.) If travel is an issue, a local organization might be the best option. "I would probably look for one fairly close to my home," says Diefenthaler. "Most programs do training at their facilities and clients do have to travel for that two-week class." A few organizations, however, do offer home-based trainings.

A Wheeler's Best Friend

Beyond the physical support a service dog can provide, families often express gratitude for the dog's help in boosting a child's self-confidence and social skills. For them, the dogs do more than pick up pencils or open refrigerator doors. They also teach kids about responsibility and serve as "social bridges," connecting their children to the world around them.

"The most important thing Marisa does for Jason," says Nancy Gackstetter, "is to



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break the ice when he goes out." In the past, without the dog, "people wouldn't always make eye contact with him. He could have started to feel more and more isolated. But with the dog, everybody will come up and talk to him, and they'll talk to him as a person." Michelle Massie reports a similar effect: "Everyone loves to see Cole working with the dog — it just changes the whole energy in the room."

For Cristalee Hill, having Braden brings her closer to her school-mates. As often happens with young wheelers going to school with nondisabled peers, Cristalee is sometimes thought of as "the kid in the wheelchair." But when Braden comes to school with her, she becomes "the kid with the really cool dog." "You know kids," says her grandmother. "At recess they'll get bored and take off, leaving Cristalee there alone. But when she's got Braden, they're right there with her."

And Cristalee herself? "He's my best friend," she says, smiling. ☺

Resources

- Assistance Dogs International, www.adionline.org
- Assistance Dogs of America Inc., 419/825-3622; www.adai.org
- Canine Companions for Independence, 800/572-2275; www.caninecompanions.org
- KSDS (formerly Kansas Specialty Dog Service/Midwest Canine Assistance), 785/325-2256; www.ksds.org
- Power Paws Assistance Dogs (Scottsdale, Ariz.), 480/945-0754; www.azpowerpaws.org
- Top Dog (Tucson, Ariz.), 888/257-6790; www.topdogusa.org

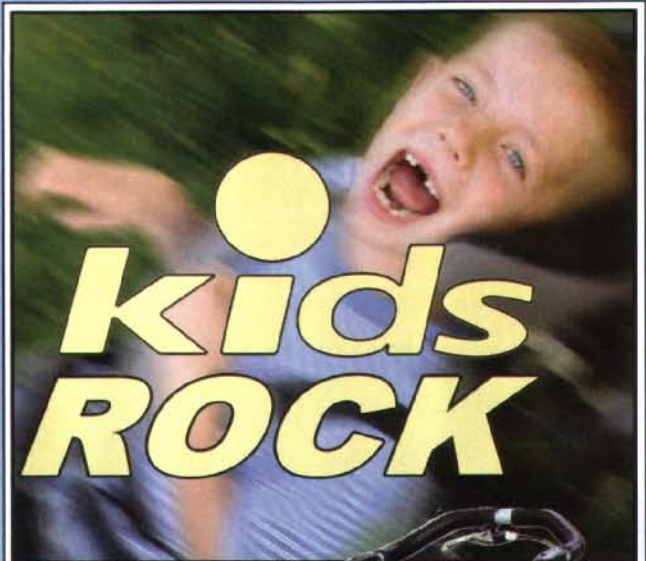
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