

Assistance dog connects two Carmel Valley families

"What I want to convey to people is, don't feel sorry for the disabled community. We are just as much human beings as you are. And don't feel sorry for me because I'm in a wheelchair. Be grateful because I am teaching you a lesson in humanity."

These heartfelt, inspiring words came with noticeable physical exertion from the mouth of Jason Gackstetter, 16, a Carmel Valley resident with cerebral palsy. The occasion was the Canine Companions for Independence graduation ceremony in which Jason received Assistance Dog Taran II.

Canine Companions is a nonprofit that enhances the lives of people with disabilities by providing highly trained assistance dogs and ongoing support to ensure quality partnerships.

Willie Crawford, Taran's volunteer puppy raiser, beamed as she handed her leash to Jason and his parents at graduation. Coincidentally, Willie lives just one mile from the Gackstetters, even though Canine Companions is a national organization with volunteers across the country. "My husband and I have known Jason and his family for many years," explains Willie. "We were thrilled to learn Taran was matched with Jason! We couldn't be more proud."

Jason is smart, funny and insightful beyond his years. However, he uses a wheelchair and has an obvious disability, which seems to be why he is rarely given opportunities to share his gifts with others. Public social encounters are awkward. Sometimes, people completely disregard Jason, not knowing how to speak to him or act around him.

This is where Taran comes in. The beautiful, well-behaved, Labrador-golden retriever cross in the blue vest captures people's attention. She is an easy conversation starter.

"I would be completely invisible without an assistance dog," explains Jason. "With Taran, it's like I'm not invisible. The world cares about me. The world cares about people like me. I'm not alone."

Taran is Jason's second assistance dog from Canine Companions. He received Assistance Dog Marisa when he



'We are just as much human beings as you are,' says Jason Gackstetter of the disabled community, and his CCI dog, Taran II, has helped him demonstrate that to people. L-R: Tim, Jason and Nancy Gackstetter, Willie Crawford and Skilled Companion Taran. Courtesy photo

was only 6 years old.

"The assistance dogs draw people to him," says Nancy, Jason's mom. "People his own age come up to Jason to talk to him about his dog. It changes people's perception of him. Instead of pitying him or thinking he's the kid in the wheelchair that they don't know how to talk to, they think he's the kid with the amazing dog. They're actually jealous!"

Besides benefiting from having an assistance dog in the family, the Gackstetters have appreciated the opportunities

to get to know other Canine Companions clients and volunteers, including Willie.

"The Canine Companions community has meant so much to us over the years," says Nancy. "We've met so many good friends. It has added to our lives tremendously."

For information on Canine Companions for Independence, visit cci.org or call 1-800-572-BARK.

Banfield Pet Hospital to open stand-alone branch in Solana Beach

BY KRISTINA HOUCK

The world's largest pet health care provider is set to open a branch in Solana Beach.

With a grand opening tentatively scheduled for Jan. 10, Banfield Pet Hospital will offer a range of services, from preventive care to surgery. Located in the Beachwalk shopping center and headed by Medical Director Shelly Ferris, the site will feature separate dog and cat exam rooms and boarding areas that play pet-friendly videos, as well as a children's play center and a free coffee bar.

Banfield Pet Hospital is the largest general veterinary practice in the world, with more than 850 locations across the United States and Puerto Rico. Although most are located inside PetSmart stores, this branch will be the company's newest stand-alone location at 437 S. Highway 101, Suite 100.

Grand opening activities will include hospital tours, "Ask-the-Vet" sessions, contests, giveaways and refreshments. Pet owners will also be invited to sign up for a Banfield Optimum Wellness Plan, a comprehensive package of veterinary services that offers year-round preventive care.

For more about Banfield Pet Hospital, visit www.banfield.com.