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Rising to the Challenge: Service Animals and Handi-capable Pets



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By Yahlara Caspedes September 30, 2011 at 12:00PM

Pets share in our companionship and provide unconditional love. But for the differently-abled human community, the human-animal bond goes much deeper than simple companionship. From facing limitations in mobility to getting about in the world, pets provide aid as service animals, thereby affording people with a sense of freedom and independence.

Specially trained service animals provide a wide range of assistance to the human community, and not just by serving as supplements to differently-abled devices; some animals are able to detect the impending onset of debilitating afflictions, such as epileptic seizures.

Animals are ceaselessly amazing, so it's no surprise that differently-abled pets are a source of inspiration and wonder, too. With the love and guidance of their owners, handi-capable pets have overcome sometimes seemingly insurmountable odds and have gone on to inspire and amaze people.

Service Animals

Seeing Eye Dogs

Obviously, Seeing Eye dogs provide increased mobility and a sense of independence for the visually impaired, but petMD wanted to provide a more in-depth account of how they do it. Herrera Ferreras, a long-time friend of his reporter, has a seeing-eye dog, and he agreed to give a first-hand account of life with his service dog, Evita.

Can you give us a general background on your Seeing Eye dog?

I got Evita (a Labrador Retriever) from the Seeing Eye in Morristown, New Jersey when she was two years old. I've had her for almost four years now; she'll be six next month.

How long is she going to remain in your care?

I've heard of some programs where you have to return the dog after a certain number of years, but luckily, Evita will be with me for the rest of her life.

After being resistant to the idea, you changed your mind about getting a Seeing Eye dog. Why?

I have a friend who is also visually impaired. He'd been suggesting I get one for years. I really disliked dogs – the dogs smell – and I thought they'd be very hard to take care of. But I also hated using the cane; I was always very conscious of whacking people accidentally with it. So I finally took my friend's advice and decided to try one out. I couldn't have been more wrong about not getting a dog. Thinking back, it's one of the best decisions I've ever made.

How has Evita changed your life?

For one thing, people definitely treat you differently. Now I'm more approachable because I'm the "gentleman with the dog." Besides that, I can walk in a crowd without having to concern myself with either having a person navigate me, or accidentally smacking people with my cane.

Describe your bond with Evita.

Because she's a trained service animal, caring for her is so much easier than I thought it would be. Accidents do happen, but they're too infrequent almost to mention.

The one thing that amazes me is how much Evita changed my feelings towards dogs. I really didn't used to like dogs at all, or ever imagined sharing my life with one. But Evita wowed her way into my heart, changed my life and turned me into a dog person. She even sleeps with me! Now, I can't imagine life without her.

Animals for Therapy

The benefits therapy dogs provide to terminally ill patients was the focus of a 2002 National Geographic article. In *Therapy Dogs Seem to Boost Health of Sick and Lonely*, author Lara Szaizdelis Bogle details how Marcia Sturm and her golden retriever, Bo, give comfort to AIDS and cardiac care patients at a Los Angeles medical center.

By participating in POUCH (Pets Offer Ongoing Care and Healing), a facility canine therapy program, Bo not only offers companionship to elderly and infirm patients, he "also helps break the tension of family members in the waiting room by taking their minds off their troubles for just a few minutes as they shower Bo with affection."

"Therapy dogs offer a different kind of help. Some pay informal social visits to people to boost their spirits, while others work in a more structured environment with trained professionals like physical therapists and social workers to help patients reach clinical goals, such as increased mobility or improved memory."

Of course, therapy animals are not limited to dogs. They can also be cats, rabbits, horses, or any type of animal that can bring comfort to a human. While some therapy animals may also double as service animals, most do not. Many therapy animals work as volunteers alongside their human owners/handlers, visiting care centers and schools and providing unconditional affection and encouragement to people who are suffering from emotional or social instabilities.

Seizure Alert Dogs

Some dogs are born with an innate ability to detect the onset of an epileptic seizure. For people who suffer from the more severe form of epilepsy, having a forewarning of an attack – from minutes to hours in advance – can have a life-changing impact on the quality of their lives.

Unfortunately, due to the mysterious nature of their ability, most medical insurance does not cover the cost of getting a seizure alert dog (a two-year training program can cost up to \$25,000). This is where the inspiring story of seven-year-old Evan Moss comes into the picture.

Evan suffers from a severe form of epilepsy, and needed \$13,000 to get a service dog. So what did Evan do? He decided to write a book to raise the money. Authored, written and illustrated by Evan, the book is available for purchase on the [CreativeSpace](#) website. Titled, *My Seizure Dog*, Evan's book "tells the sweet story of what Evan expects the relationship with his seizure dog to be like."

Evan's money raising efforts have gone so well that he was featured this month in [CreativeSpace's member spotlight](#). [CreativeSpace](#) reports that national attention has helped him to surpass his initial financial goal. The Moss family's "newest, furest member of the Moss family will arrive in June 2012, giving the Mosses peace of mind and Evan greater independence, which he most certainly has earned."

Handicapable Pets

Visually Impaired Pit Bull Becomes Therapy Dog

In a recent article, [Blind Pit Bull Shows Humans the Light](#), writer Jen Milner detailed her personal experience in adopting a blind pit bull that came to be known as "Stevie the Wonder Dog." As a regular contributor to [StubbyDog.org](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to changing public perception of pit bulls, Milner soon realized that Stevie's charming personality "destined [Stevie] to be a [breed] ambassador."

In fact, Milner reports that Stevie is now a Delta International Society certified therapy dog.

Three-Legged Canine Wins Crowds at Disc Competition

Lynne Ouchida, a Central Oregon Humane Society employee, met Maty after the puppy was abandoned in a motel room. While in their care, Maty "developed a staph infection that destroyed her tendons and ligaments, and vets had to amputate her left hind leg."

"To keep the dog fit, Ouchida played Frisbee with her on the front lawn of her house in Bend, Oregon."

Reader's Digest featured Maty in their August slide show, [Your Dog Can Do What?! Meet 4 Amazing Canines, Why Maty?](#) Because after competing in the Skyboundz World Canine Disc championship, the three-legged pooch placed in the top ten competitors.

Learn More

- For more information on miraculous service and handi-capable pets, visit:
 - [The Seeing Eye](#) for information on Seeing Eye dogs
 - [Delta Society International](#) to find out more about therapy dogs
 - [Love on a Leash](#), because cats are trained to work as therapy animals too
- The Animal Assisted Therapy Programs of Colorado has a [great list of resources](#) for recommended reading
- And you can visit Evan Moss's website at [dog4evan](#)

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Of Americans look online before consulting a vet if a pet is sick or injured

Source: Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Study

73%

of pet owners believe pets can sniff out illness

Source: Harris/Decima Poll

"A dog teaches a boy fidelity, perseverance, and to turn around 3 times before lying down"

- Robert Benchley

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