

A WONDERFUL GIFT

CHRIS DEHNCKE AND MOBILITY ASSIST DOG ESMERELDA

BY ELIZABETH ERICKSON

Before becoming a part of the Can Do Canines program, Chris Dehncke, a student at Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, Minn., went home most weekends to Morton to be with his parents, Karen and Donald. Now, Esmeralda, Chris's Mobility Assist Dog, makes him more comfortable to stay on campus.

Chris was born premature with cerebral palsy and has type-one diabetes. His friend Franky, also a student at SMSU, received an assistance dog from Can Do Canines and suggested that Chris should get an assistance dog from the program as well. Chris said Franky is a big reason he became a part of the program, "Without him, I don't think any of this would have been possible."

Chris wanted an assistance dog because he frequently drops items he cannot pick up and has difficulty opening doors for himself making it hard to go everywhere he would like. Chris feared he would not be able to get help if an emergency occurred when he was alone and thought an assistance dog would help alleviate this fear.

Esmeralda, a two-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever, grew up as a part of the puppy training program at Federal Correctional Institute at Wasesca. There, she was raised and trained by two inmate handlers and taken on public outing by prison employee families on weekends. One of her inmate handlers said, "Esmeralda has been a wonderful gift to me. I've learned more from this experience than I have taught her."

Esmeralda was trained to pick up dropped items and open doors for Chris. He said working with Esmeralda was a lot of work at first and joked that she definitely did things at her own pace. Now that the two have developed a true bond Chris says they work together flawlessly.



CHRIS DEHNCKE AND ESMERALDA

"The other day I was watching a movie and I dropped my phone because I was trying to change it to vibrate." Chris said, "Esme just reached around and picked it up like it was nothing and gave it back to me."

Because of Esmeralda, Chris stays on campus more regularly and relies less on his personal care assistant. Another of Esmeralda's skills is bringing Chris an emergency phone if he needs it. He says she has given him much more self-confidence and is a great companion when his parents cannot be with him.

Chris is two years away from graduating SMSU with a degree in social work. He said that because of his new companion, Esmeralda, he has considered staying on campus to study during the summer.

Chris hopes the Can Do Canines donors will keep doing what they are doing because it is a great way to help those who cannot do everything as easily as they would like.



LINDA LAKE AND RUPA

THE UNLIKELY TALE OF A CRAIGSLIST RESCUE LINDA LAKE AND MOBILITY ASSIST DOG RUPA

Every retail store should have a greeter like Rupa! When people walk into Flowers by the Lake in Maple Plain, Minn., they invariably get a happy welcome from the lovable Yellow Labrador mix.

But Rupa performs her most important work as a Can Do Canines Mobility Assist Dog on behalf of the flower shop's owner, Linda Lake.

A couple years ago, Linda started experiencing symptoms and was eventually diagnosed with an autoimmune disease. "Right now, it appears to be psoriatic arthritis," she explains. "However, it also seems to be progressing, and we're not sure what it will turn into. I'm thinking maybe lupus."

On top of that, she suffered a dislocated knee about a year ago, and it didn't heal well, causing balance and mobility issues. Life became steadily more difficult for Linda, both at the shop and at her home in Plymouth, Minn.

She ultimately became a Can Do Canines client — but not according to the typical story line. You see, Rupa came to Linda as a pet. "She was a rescue dog that I got off Craigslist, so I'm not sure exactly how old she is."

From the very start, Linda appreciated Rupa's companionship...and then a light bulb clicked on. "Many times, I dropped things such as my keys or cane and had trouble picking them up. One day, I looked at Rupa and said 'I wish you could pick up those keys for me.' So I asked her to do it, and she did! It was then I realized she's so intelligent, she could do just about anything!"

The question was, how could Linda channel this intelligence? Well, sometimes answers come in the most improbable ways.

"One day, I was telling an intern in my shop that I wished Rupa could go into the stores with me. It turns out, the intern is a former Can Do Canines volunteer, and she said 'I used to work at a place where they train dogs to do just that. You should call them!'"

After meeting with the pair, Can Do Canines staff learned how much Rupa already was doing for Linda and agreed to train her to become a Mobility Assist Dog. Leslie Flowers, Can Do Canines Client Services Coordinator, provided the training.

Now certified as a Mobility Assist Dog, Rupa relishes the jobs she performs for Linda. Mostly, her work consists of picking up household items and bringing them to Linda. Because Linda has trouble bending over to accept retrieved items, Rupa will elevate by putting her front paws up on a table or other piece of furniture. Rupa even helps out at the flower shop, for example, dragging hoses over to plants in need of watering.

She's also learned how to press the button that opens doors at store entrances. "Rupa is so excited to go into these stores. I think she likes shopping more than I do!" Linda laughs. "On the flip side, she's very disappointed if she doesn't get to go with me into a store."

Watching the two together, there's no doubt this is a mutually beneficial relationship. Says Linda: "It's awesome to watch Rupa work and to know how much she loves to help me. Her tail wags like crazy because she's so happy!"

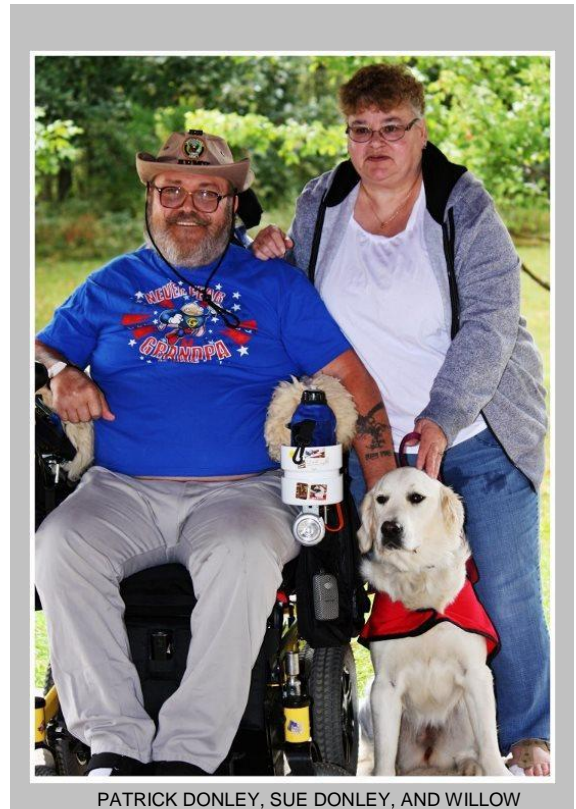
OPENING DOORS TO MORE PAT DONLEY AND MOBILITY ASSIST DOG WILLOW BY SHELLY HIEMER

The little things most people would take for granted mean a lot to Pat Donley today. “I appreciate everything everyone has done for me,” says the man friends describe as stubborn and determined. “Trying to find an assistance dog outfit to help is hard. Most of the organizations wanted me to travel to them for up to three months. Can Do Canines comes right to the person.” What means the most to Pat Donley today is regaining some of his independence and for his family, their peace of mind.

More than twenty years ago, Pat, of Chippewa Falls, Wisc., was run over by a semi truck. He recovered, but suffered permanent damage to his pelvis and spinal cord. Ten years later, ongoing problems sent him back to doctors and he was diagnosed with progressive multiple sclerosis. The disease was slowly robbing him of his mobility. Those little things we take for granted, such as opening a door, turning on the lights, and picking up dropped items had not only become hard for Pat but nearly impossible on most days.

Several years ago a nurse at the Minneapolis VA Hospital mentioned assistance dogs to Pat, but he wasn't ready. “You have to deal with your disability before getting the dog. Then you can accept the dog and what it can do for you,” says the tough Vietnam veteran. That day finally came in 2010. Pat applied and was accepted into the Can Do Canines program.

Even though Pat had animals most of his life, he was not completely prepared for the beautiful 18-month-old Golden Retriever named Willow who was about to change his life. “I had to learn to not use my deep military voice around her,” says the man described as gruff on the outside but a teddy bear on the inside, “The trainers kept reminding me.” Once over that stumbling block, the two quickly formed a bond that goes beyond what Willow does for Pat.



Those things we might take for granted, Willow now does for Pat. She can turn lights off and on, retrieve dropped items, and open doors. Willow opens doors to more than his house, she opens doors for Pat to get back into the world around him. Her presence is also welcome companionship whether Pat is spending time in his workshop or out at local malls, restaurants or the VA hospital.

Pat's grown children worry less knowing Willow will go get his wife, Sue, if Pat needs her. Willow has even learned to nudge her awake and lead Sue to Pat. If no one is in the house, Willow will bring an emergency phone to Pat so he can call for help.

Pat's care assistants and friends have fallen in love with Willow, too. “She is quite a hit at the bowling alley – she thinks she is the queen there!” laughs Pat as he looks down, smiling, “I already have a friend who has applied for a dog. If I can help someone else by telling them about Can Do Canines, I want to do that.” The gruff military voice is a long way off as he gently strokes Willow's soft ear.

A NEW PARTNERSHIP

BRITTNEY STEPTOE AND MOBILITY ASSIST DOG EMBER

BY STAFF WRITER

Brittney Steptoe has come a long way. Displaced after surviving hurricane Katrina in southern Louisiana, she and her partner, Mike, moved to the Midwest. While visiting friends in Minnesota, she decided to settle down in Rochester. True to form, she has made the best of life, becoming involved in creative and social activities as life allows.

Several years ago, Brittney began experiencing bouts of fatigue and widespread pain. Eventually she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. She also has a balance disorder that can cause her to become unsteady or fall suddenly. “On good days, I have some energy for work on my computer or around the house, or for a social activity,” she says. “On bad days it can be hard to get out of bed.”

Brittney says she had always loved animals, and soon their house was filled with three cats and an Australian Shepherd/Golden Retriever puppy named Ember. The puppy, smart and enthusiastic, picked up basic obedience quickly. “When my medical conditions flared up, I realized that Ember was trying to help,” she says. Ember had been trained to walk behind or beside Brittney, so she wouldn’t over the dog. “One day Ember ran in front of me, keeping me from going down the stairs,” she recalls. “Suddenly I was overtaken by a dizzy spell and sat down.” She realized that Ember had blocked her path, keeping her from a potentially disastrous fall.

That was when Brittney remembered having seen Can Do Canines at a Renaissance Festival years before. She began to research assistance dogs on the Internet. “I didn’t find much help on training my own dog,” she says, “but Can Do Canines kept coming up in my searches.” When she discovered she and Ember could apply to become a team, she was delighted. In her



“Ember is an amazing, funny dog and has been a godsend.” Ember and Brittney completed two levels of obedience, Canine Good Citizen certification and Therapy Dog classes.

In the meantime, they were accepted into the owner-trained program and the real work began. Ember had to pass the medical and temperament testing that all Can Do Canines assistance dogs complete. Then the team began training specific assistance dog skills with Client Services Coordinator Dora Schroeder and Field Trainer Julia Breza. “We had to establish a new relationship—a true partnership—between Ember and me,” she says. Soon the team was ready for final testing. “Training is always a work in progress. To get to this level in the training and be 100 percent certified, it feels amazing,” says Brittney.

Now, Ember is Brittney’s constant companion. She provides a counterbalance for Brittney while walking, picks up items she drops, and retrieves an emergency phone or help when needed. “Just as importantly, having a vested assistance dog with you in public makes people more aware,” Brittney says, “so you can get help if you need it.”

She adds that, despite the fact that she and Ember had accomplished so much on their own, the extra knowledge from a professional in the assistance dog industry made a big difference. “We could not have done it by ourselves,” she says. “The benefits of such a partnership are amazing. We are so thankful we had Can Do Canines to help.”