

GAINING SAFETY, INDEPENDENCE AND CONFIDENCE

JULIA AMIS AND HEARING ASSIST DOG CLAIRE

By Bill Johnson

Julia Amis vividly recalls the night when the fire alarm went off in her apartment. At the time, she was attending Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in Rochester, NY. Deaf since childhood, Julia of course couldn't hear the fire alarm, and the alarm's flashing light didn't wake her either.

"The RA (resident assistant) had to come and get me out of bed. I was so embarrassed," she admits. "After that experience, I decided I needed to do something to become more independent."

Julia's quest led her to Can Do Canines and ultimately to Hearing Assist Dog Claire, a two-year-old chocolate Labrador Retriever.

With Claire by her side, the 22-year-old resident of Minneapolis, Minn., says she feels "much safer," especially at night when she's alone.

In addition to the fire alarm, Claire is trained to alert Julia to a variety of common household sounds, such as the alarm clock, oven timer and doorbell. Upon hearing the sound, Claire nudges Julia, then goes to the sound and sits.

Before she had Claire, Julia missed important cues around the house and out in public. While at RIT, for instance, her apartment had a doorbell-and-light system, "but it didn't work very well," she says. Consequently, she didn't always know when someone was ringing the doorbell.

"Finally, I'd receive a text message saying that someone was at my door, but they had already left. Having Claire alert me is much better than relying on text messages!"

Away from home, Claire provides valuable assistance, too.



JULIA AND CLAIRE

"If someone yells my name, Claire will run to me and let me know. She'll nudge me and take me to that person. Or, if she hears a siren, she'll nudge me and sit down. I'll turn and see an ambulance going by."

In short, Julia feels she has gained much more than just an awareness of important sounds; she's gained greater independence and confidence as she pursues her dreams. At every step, Claire is proving to be highly adaptable to various new situations, whether it's flying on an airplane, playing on an ocean beach in Georgia, attending a cousin's wedding (wearing a shiny new collar with a flower in it!) or getting acclimated to a new apartment — which is happening this fall, as Julia starts classes at Dunwoody College of Technology in Minneapolis.

Along the way, the two have formed a tight bond that transcends the working relationship. "Claire is so sweet and affectionate," effuses Julia. "If I ever have to leave home without her, I feel sad...but when I come home, she's so excited to see me. She's such an important part of my life."

Julia's deep affection for her dog extends to her feelings about Can Do Canines and all the people who were instrumental in bringing Claire to her. "The people who trained with Claire me are amazing...I'm incredibly impressed with them. Can Do Canines is an awesome organization that helps so many people. They've really done amazing things with those dogs!"



A PERFECT FIT

MIKAYLA SALLS AND AUTISM ASSIST DOG NICKSON

By Staff Writer

Like most parents, Chris and Melissa Salls' lives revolve around their seven-year-old daughter Mikayla. School, going to the park and playing outside in the fenced yard are favorite activities for the family but that is where the similarities end. The fear of losing Mikayla in a crowd or into traffic, and the distraction of a public tirade, stops them from enjoying the much bigger world around their Andover, Minn. home. With beautiful blue eyes and a sunny smile, Mikayla was like so many other children in her neighborhood until she began to have problems communicating what she wants or needs to her parents. She was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of three. Autism causes her to have "meltdowns" or to bolt away from her parents, sometimes into dangerous situations. Her school even installed an alarm system, just in case she bolted away from her classroom unseen.

Looking for resources to help Mikayla, the Salls joined support groups. At one group they met the Schuler family and Can Do Canines first Autism Assist Dog, Reno. Melissa knew Mikayla loved dogs and thought an Autism Assist Dog would be a good fit for their entire family. Excited about the possibility of opening a new world for their daughter, Chris began researching assistance dogs.

Time and again he came back to the organization in their own back yard, Can Do Canines. In 2009 they applied saying they wanted an assistance dog to help keep Mikayla safe and be a calming influence for her.

This spring that "fit", a perfect fit for Mikayla, was found. Can Do Canines introduce the Salls to Nickson, a beautiful two-year-old Australian Shepherd. While the Salls had pet dogs in the past, Mikayla had never been receptive to them. You could frequently hear her tell them to get down or go away. Somehow, Nickson seemed to have a different effect on the little girl. While they did not cuddle up right away, she accepted Nickson as being part of her world, and a good part at that.

Melissa says Nickson is providing an adjunct to their in-home therapies, helping Mikayla calm herself when she is upset and teaching her responsibility when she brushes and feeds him. She is now taking instruction better, getting into the routine of caring for Nickson and herself. At night they sleep together, Nickson lying close by her side.

"I am not as worried about Mikayla bolting away from us in public," says Chris. Now with Nickson at her side, a firm grip on the handle on his vest and wearing the tether that keeps them together, Mikayla is learning to interact more in her world. She has even asked to go shopping after school, something she began to enjoy while training in public with Client Services Coordinator Leslie Flowers. "We may have created a monster!" her mom says with a laugh. Quite a change from the days when Mikayla did not like being out in crowded places.

For the first time, the Salls are looking forward to the school year where they hope Nickson can join Mikayla in class. "We also to try more community outings, going out as a family all together," says Melissa. Now, with Nickson, they are dreaming of a true family vacation, maybe even Disneyworld.

To help others like Mikayla receive special dogs like Nickson, visit our website at <http://can-do-canines.org/donate/>

THE BIGGEST GIFT

KATHY SCHROEDER AND MOBILITY ASSIST DOG CARLEY

By Staff Writer

When friends describe Kathy Schroeder, they use words like a great listener, very funny and a Twins fanatic. What they do not say is that she tires easily or has trouble walking. Her friends just don't see that, but her family does. Kathy's husband, Gerald, and her daughter, Maureen, worried constantly since her diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) that she would fall and not be able to get help. As her MS progressed, Kathy lost her ability to balance and must now use a cane or walker to help steady her. Her Stewartville, Minn. family also saw that, sadly, as her mobility retreated, Kathy was retreating, too.

Kathy's niece, a professional pet groomer in St. Paul, knew about Can Do Canines and thought an assistance dog would be a good fit for her Aunt Kathy. As a retired dog groomer and trainer, Kathy understood the special link dogs often had with their people. When daughter Maureen joined the campaign to get her to apply for an assistance dog, Kathy agreed and started her paperwork.

In her application to Can Do Canines, Kathy said she wanted a dog to help brace her to stand when she falls, and retrieve dropped items. "These things will help me maintain my independence and provide a safer environment with a sense of security" Kathy stated.

Carley, a two-year-old black Labrador Retriever, seemed to have exactly what Kathy was asking for. Her Puppy Raisers, Mary and Jon Alexander, said she was smart and enthusiastic and quickly passed all four levels of testing at Can Do Canines. In the two months she spent in the training program at the Minnesota Correctional Facility at Faribault, her handlers worked to improve her 45 basic skills for being



KATHY AND CARLEY

an assistance dog. She was such a quick learner, they also taught her a few new ones including crawl, handstand, bang, and bye-bye.

Kathy and Carley worked with Can Do Canines Field Trainer Julia Breeza once Carley was placed in Kathy's home. "Carley came so well trained," said Julia, "and it was obvious that Kathy had a lot of obedience and dog training experience." That made the placement easier for everyone involved, except for maybe Kathy's family who had to endure the "hands off, I'm working" time during training. "They understood the necessity of that bonding period," Kathy recalls, "but they sure enjoy playing with her now!"

Now Carley is not only Kathy's best friend, but a constant companion who makes life easier and safer for her. The most significant thing for Kathy has been the counter balance. While walking, Kathy holds the handle on Carley's harness to steady her and provide a brace for navigating stairs. If she drops an item, Carley will pick it up from the floor and bring it back to her, and can retrieve a phone in an emergency. All of this brings much greater peace of mind to Kathy's family.

To make more dogs like Carley available, please visit www.can-do-canines.org. Thank you!
