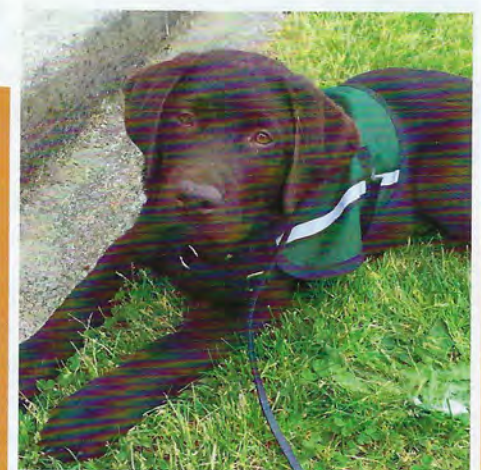


Jarred and Wesley



Summit Assistance Dogs

By John Brierley

Dogs have long been known as “man’s best friend,” but if you use a wheelchair, a Summit Assistance Dog becomes not only your trusted companion but also a canine caregiver, picking things up for you, opening doors, turning lights on and off, fetching the phone in an emergency, and more. Service dogs enable people living with disabilities to lead lives of much greater independence and autonomy.

The Summit program was founded in Anacortes in 2000 by Sue Meininger to help meet the overwhelming need for skilled service dogs in the area. Since then, eighty-five people living with disabilities have had their lives transformed by a Summit Assistance dog.

It all starts with a brand new litter of puppies, either bred by Summit themselves or bought from other breeders. After eight weeks, the puppies are placed with volunteer puppy raisers who care for them over the next twelve months or so.

Summit Assistance Dogs provides regular training classes for their foster volunteers, who are expected to devote fifteen to twenty minutes each day to training their puppy and to care for the dog’s routine needs, such as feeding, grooming, exercise and socialization. Support is available from the organization every step of the way.

One first-time puppy raiser, Sarah Roberts, recently fostered Iris. “It’s been interesting,” she said at the time. “I forgot what it takes to raise a puppy. It’s a lot of work, but it’s just so much fun! She was so sweet and happy to see me



when I had been away from her for a while. It can be hard when the day comes to release the puppy for its next phase of training, but you go into it knowing that it’s not going to be yours for years. It’s just so worth it knowing that she could become an amazing service dog.”

Once the puppies leave their foster homes, they are sent off to prison. No, you didn’t misread that. Summit has created an innovative training partnership with the Monroe Correctional Complex where carefully screened inmates house and train puppies for about nine weeks at a time. It’s a creative solution for training puppies on a tight budget, and it has produced huge benefits for all concerned.

For the inmates, it can be truly life changing. Working with the dogs teaches them responsibility, anger management, communication skills and compassion. It has become a prized program in the prison, giving inmates a chance to give back to society and learn life skills they can employ on the outside. For Summit, it greatly increases their training capacity.

Upon graduation from Monroe, the dogs enter their final phase of training with a pro-

fessional Summit trainer which lasts about six to eight months. At this stage, the training can also be customized for a specific client.

Not all dogs make the cut; in fact, only about four out of ten make it in programs nationwide. For example, dogs who are overly timid, have too strong a “prey drive,” or are “food aggressive” are not suitable to become service dogs. They become “career-changed” dogs who will make great family pets and are adopted out to loving forever homes.

There is clearly a huge need for service dogs in western Washington and nationwide. Currently, about thirty people are on Summit’s

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Sarah and Iris

waiting list. It costs around \$25,000 to train a Summit Assistance Dog over about two years, including the cost of working with some of the dogs ultimately become career-changed. Although some service-dog organizations charge for what they do, Summit does not because of the huge financial burden for their clients. As a non-profit, the organization relies on the generosity of donors.

Once trained and placed with its client, a service dog generally works for nine to ten years before going into retirement. I heard firsthand what a difference one of these service dogs can make in a person's life when I spoke with Lacey Woods, who has a rare form of Muscular Dystrophy and uses a wheelchair. Her dog, Isabelle, has been with her for about six years. Isabelle helps Lacey take off her jacket by tugging on her sleeves and moves objects out of her way as she navigates around the house. Lacey says she is always dropping items which Isabelle retrieves for her. When they are out and about, Isabelle pushes the button to open automatic doors. According to Lacey, Isabelle thinks she is a human and much prefers to be with people than with other dogs. "I didn't realize what a difference she would make in my life", Lacey told me. "She has become a part of me. She is like one of my limbs. I just cannot imagine life without her."

Once a Summit dog is placed with a client, the organization provides follow-up for the working lifetime of the dog, meeting with the client and dog at least once a year and offering special support as needed to make sure the partnership is the best it can be.



Lacey and Isabelle

Summit is always looking for new puppy raisers. These volunteers are the backbone of the organization, as they are for all service-dog organizations who couldn't do their work without the people who launch the pups on their journey to a life-changing partnership with someone in need. To learn more, visit summitdogs.org/volunteer. Summit would welcome you as part of a cherished resource.

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