



In Their Debt

by Shelley Bueche

Dogs with Odd Jobs

Service Dogs and Teams Going Beyond Traditional Roles



Mary McNeight and her diabetic alert dog, Liame.

Today, service dog jobs have expanded well beyond the traditional roles of guide dogs helping their visually impaired owners navigate daily life and other duties. Labs are now being trained to assist owners with balance and mobility needs, help persons diagnosed with immune disorders, help owners with emotional difficulties, and respond to owners during episodic crises. It truly seems there is no limit to how canines can be trained to help their owners in achieving independence and well-being on a daily basis.

Hope is Mine

"Everything starts with hope. It's sort of an affirmation [to let] people know hope is theirs," explains Alex Dumas, founder of Hope is Mine, on naming her non-profit organization after her service dog.

In 2006, Dumas was diagnosed with a debilitating illness and ended up in hospice care. At the time,

she only weighed 105 pounds, and she would sleep for 36 hours, wake up, and immediately pass out. Her doctors urged her to obtain a service dog to help with her daily life, but she always resisted the idea. Finally, when Dumas was out of hospice and on her way to better health, she acquired a service dog to assist her in her daily routine and named her Hope.

To say that having Hope in her life became a joy and reason to live would be an accurate statement. In fact, Dumas was so pleased with having Hope that she started a non-profit organization in 2010, aptly called Hope is Mine.

Hope is Mine was started to help those in need "by providing them with service dogs and empowering them to live a life of fulfillment and become an integral part of society," explains Dumas. The agency strives to assist, financially and emotionally, those waiting for dogs to help them with daily life – people like Jason Owens, who was diagnosed with *neurofibromatosis* in 1996.

Neurofibromatosis is a genetic disorder that causes tumors to spread throughout the central nervous system. There is no cure for the disorder, and Owens has had dozens of surgeries to help alleviate his symptoms. He is also waiting for a service dog to help himself, as well as his family (Owens is married with two young children), in their everyday tasks. This change, according to Dumas, will "create a ripple effect" in creating independence and stability.

Of course, training and placing a service dog for assistance isn't cheap. This is where Hope is Mine comes in, by helping clients raise necessary funds and awareness in the community. Dumas and Hope became the first-ever service dog team to run in a marathon, raising crucial funds for clients such as Owens. If you are interested in learning more about Hope is Mine, visit www.hopeismine.org and broaden the ripple effect.

Narcolepsy Alert Dogs

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders & Stroke (NINDS) defines *narcolepsy* as a chronic disorder characterized by the brain's inability to control sleep-wake cycles. Moreover, the NINDS states that although narcolepsy is not rare, it is under-recognized and underdiagnosed, affecting about one in every 3,000 Americans. The sleep disorder can strike at any time, causing a person to

pup to the Service Dog Academy for help in training her dog to become a narcolepsy alert dog. "Now," according to McNeight, "Marduk is 150 pounds heavier and almost fully grown. He not only responds to her [his owner Cecilia] anxiety cues and protects her when a narcoleptic episode kicks in, but thanks to our donation of a reduced cost Service Dog class, he alerts her before an episode, giving her the warning she



Alex Dumas and Hope.

fall asleep while at home, at work, in mid-sentence, eating a meal, driving a car, or operating heavy machinery.

The concept of a narcolepsy alert dog is a relatively new one. Mary McNeight, director of training and behavior for the Service Dog Academy in Washington, was an early pioneer in training dogs to assist their narcoleptic owners. "I came up with the idea to try narcolepsy alert dog training in 2009 after chatting on Facebook with one of my high school friends with narcolepsy" explains McNeight.

McNeight worked closely with a woman who brought a great Dane

needs to get in a comfortable, safe spot. She has now found a stable job that welcomes Marduk as part of their own, has a learner's permit to drive, and is enjoying a life greatly improved thanks to her narcolepsy alert dog."

The Service Dog Academy also trains narcolepsy response dogs. The differences between narcolepsy alert dog and narcolepsy response dogs are like the differences between night and day. "An alert dog," says McNeight "is trained to perform all of the tasks of a narcolepsy response dog; however, the alert dog is scent trained to tell the owner before they have a

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Hope is Mine Foundation, Inc.
www.hopeismine.org
info@hopeismine.org
(574) 250-7997

Service Dog Academy
www.servicedogacademy.com
info@servicedogacademy.com

Wilderwood Service Dogs
www.wilderwood.org
(865) 660-0095

narcoleptic attack so that they can get into a safe position or safe place to have their attack. The narcolepsy alert dog prevents the severe body injury that can occur by falling asleep while upright or in unsafe positions."

Occasionally people who are not aware they even have narcolepsy are alerted by an alert dog. Marduk was at home with his owner Cecilia when two door-to-door ministers stopped by for a chat. As one of the men began

to yawn and dose off, Marduk began to alert. Cecilia then asked him if he had problems staying awake. He answered yes, that sometimes he "fell asleep in mid conversation" and that it was "extremely embarrassing." At that point, Cecilia advised him to get screened for narcolepsy.

Neuro Service Dogs

Wilderwood Service Dogs specializes in providing service dogs for people with spectrum disorders (autism and aspergers), pervasive development disorders, neurological impairments (lupus, narcolepsy, Huntington's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and brain injuries), psychiatric disorders (PTSD, bipolar, and anxiety), and episodic disorders (epilepsy, meniere's, and migraines).

President and founder of Wilderwood, Tiffany Denyer, states that the dogs are trained in general assistance for up to six months and then undergo specialized training

in their field for a finite period until they are matched with an owner. "The needs for someone with PTSD for example," Denyer points out, "would be very different than someone with Parkinson's."

Wilderwood Service Dogs is based in Maryville, Tennessee, three hours outside of Nashville, and there is a second training facility in Willisville, Illinois, where puppies are trained in basic service commands prior to specialization training.



Shelley is a canine journalist living with her family and three dogs, in Austin, Texas. She enjoys writing about working Labrador retrievers and related programs and is eager to read

your tips for future columns. Please contact her directly - SHBueche@aol.com - with your ideas.

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