

FROM LAP TO LAUNDRY: TOY SERVICE DOGS

by Debi Davis

"Look Mommy!", the small girl squealed, watching my nine pound Papillon service dog pick up the car keys I'd dropped. "That doggy wants to drive the car!" Driving a car is one of the few things my service dog Peek can't do for me. However, the tasks he performs for me each day more than make up for his inability to play chauffeur. As a person with a disability using a wheelchair for legs, Peek helps me remain independent and self-sufficient by doing tasks, which are difficult or painful for me to perform.

Each morning Peek hears the alarm clock ring, then slaps the snooze button with his paw for five more minutes of snuggling in bed.. After nature breaks, he helps tug off my pajamas, then hands them to me to fold up and put away. When I'm dressed, Peek knows it's time to make the bed, and jumps in position on the far side of the mattress, waiting for the cue to "tug the covers". Grasping the sheet between his teeth, he pulls it up toward the bedstead, then repeats the task with the comforter. "Pillows", I whisper .Peek pulls the pillows into place then looks to me for another cue. I dream of ways to teach him to pour me a cup of coffee, but so far the training techniques elude me.

When breakfast is finished, Peek helps me with the housework. Following me from room to room, he picks up any object I point to, races to retrieve it, and then places it in the basket on my lap. I point to the cordless phone, and he fetches it, places it on the hook. The TV controls are deposited on the end table. Peek reluctantly stashes all his favorite toys in his toy box, sighs, and follows me into the kitchen.

I point to the lower cupboard and say, "Open". Peek pulls on the leather thong attached to the handle, then waits as I throw trash into the container under the sink before closing the door with a swipe of his paw. On laundry days, Peek is also a great help. Because I get dizzy when I bend over, Peek's job is to tug the clothes out of the dryer and put them in the clothesbasket for me, while I sit in my wheelchair and fold them. And although he'd prefer to sleep in the pile of dirty clothes, he does my bidding by bringing me the next load of laundry to be washed, one piece at a time.

On shopping days, Peek jumps on my lap and presses the handicap door opener button for me. We roll to the elevator, where he again presses the button with his nose. Peek the Papillon is one of many toy dogs who have been specially trained to assist people with disabilities. Peek and others like him have full legal access to all public places including hotels, restaurants, airplanes and hospitals by Federal law, under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The public is used to seeing large breeds doing guide work and service dog work, but a toy dog performing assistance tasks always raises eyebrows in public. Many seem to think our toys are only hothouse plants, lap dogs or ankle biters and yappers. Comments of "Oh, he's so cute!" soon turn to "Oh, he's so helpful!" when they see a toy dog do most everything a large breed of service dog can do.

Yet, the amazing abilities of our toy working dogs are overlooked by most large service dog training programs. These programs prefer dogs like Golden Retrievers, which have a history of even temperament, and whose size and strength make them easily adaptable to those with a wide variety of disabilities. And its true that large dogs are needed for those owners requiring dogs to pull their wheelchairs and open heavy doors, or assisting them with balance while they are getting out of the bathtub. But not all people with disabilities require this assistance.

Many people with mobility impairments mainly need a dog to do retrieval tasks, and a toy dog is indeed a viable option. For deaf persons, a toy dog is trained to alert the owner by pawing them to sounds of sirens, ringing phones and smoke alarms. Persons living with seizure disorders are often alerted by their dogs prior to an onset, in order to prepare for the episode. Toy dogs also successfully aid persons living with mental and psychological disabilities, such as agoraphobia and panic disorders. In most every area of service work, with the exception of wheelchair pulling, opening heavy doors or balance assistance, toy dogs have shown they are excellent workers and take a back seat to no larger breed.

For those living in small apartments, a toy service dog may be ideal. Traveling by car and plane are certainly easier with a toy, as they take up much less space. In restaurants, they fit easily under a chair or table, staying out of the way better than their larger canine counterparts. Clean up after nature calls are easier, and the amount of food consumed considerably less. The choice of a toy dog for service work can no longer be deemed laughable. Since the large service dog organizations shun small dogs for general service work, disabled persons wanting to train a toy in this manner must either find one of smaller organizations who will work with them, or they may work with an experienced general trainer who can adapt techniques for training assistance exercises.

One organization that does train toys is Handi-Dogs, Inc. of Tucson, a non-profit agency founded 25 years ago. Handi Dogs, Inc. instructs people with disabilities in ways to train their own dogs. Using operant conditioning and clicker training, even those persons with extremely limited movement and strength are able to successfully train their dogs through to certification. This method of training uses no compulsion, so the disabled handler is not required to do leash pops or move the dog physically around the floor. Training is done in a large, barrier-free indoor facility, which allows students to train year around. Classes are very small to allow for individual attention and customized assistance training.

This type of facility is now becoming more commonplace around the country, as instructors realize the benefits of owner training. This also motivates the person who will not relinquish a pet toy dog in order to have a large breed service dog as their assistant. And why should they? There is no reason why a dog cannot be a pet as well as a working dog. Peter Van Dyk lives with quadriplegia and uses a power wheelchair. His service dog Samantha, a red Min Pin, works from the top of a briefcase on Peter's lap, fetching objects he drops. Samantha knows when Peter drops his glasses, she has to pick them up

by the nosepiece and hand them to her owner carefully. That she is a lifeline to his continued independence is obvious to all that see Samantha eagerly work for Peter.

Brandy, a Toy Poodle, assists her owner Sandy Nash by doing retrieval tasks. Sandy lives with an ongoing threat of embolisms, and often uses crutches for mobility. Brandy picks up items Sandy drops and is also a marvelous emotional support on those days when pain makes it hard to smile. Brandy is also being trained to carry bags, money, and other objects for Sandy while she is using crutches.

Calvin the Papillon belongs to Hazel Liebert, who lives with a hearing impairment. One of the most frightening things to people with a significant hearing loss is the inability to hear warning signals, such as smoke alarms or police sirens. And although Hazel's hearing is enhanced by the use of hearing aids, she often has difficulty recognizing from which direction a sound is coming. Now, if someone calls to Hazel, Calvin will paw at her and take her to the source of the voice calling her name. At night, when Hazel is not wearing her hearing aids, Calvin is there to alert her in case of emergency. If the smoke detector rings, Calvin will wake Hazel up and take her to the nearest exit door for safety. "It gives me such peace of mind", Hazel states, with a warm smile, as she scratches Calvin's ears

Item retrieval and signal alerting are not the only ways in which toy service dogs help their owners. Many are used for life support systems for those living with emotional and psychological disabilities. Carol King, who uses a Yorkshire Terrier as her service dog, has opened many minds to how valuable a dog can be to those living with psychological disabilities. She works tirelessly as a front runner in the service dog movement to help others understand just how valuable a dog performing emotional and psychological support can be. "For emotional or psychological disabilities just the dog's presence alone can be all the treatment or therapy that's needed," Carol explains, and notes that many disabilities are "hidden", such as anxiety disorders and neuroses, Schizophrenia, Agoraphobia, recovery from trauma or depression, or autism. Carol further explains that, " If a dog can meet that need, and afford the feeling of safety or support that it takes for the person to leave the house, the dog has helped the disabled person to achieve a more normal life. "

According to King, insurance companies have found it saves 78% of human health care cost if a dog can do the job, and a human does not have to be hired to care for the patient. And yet with 49 million disabled persons, roughly only 16,000 have assistance dogs. Thanks to the efforts of King and others, hopefully more people will soon become aware of the immense value of service dogs in assisting with both physical and mental disabilities.

The public is used to seeing guide dogs in business establishments, but many people have never heard of service dogs to help people with general disabilities. Even fewer can conceive of how a toy breed could possibly handle performing service work. The intelligence and working ability of our toy breeds is still too often met with incredulity. In an effort to publicize the wonderful work our toy dogs are capable of doing in the service

dog field, I'm hoping to do upcoming seminars and demonstrations at toy breed specialties. I have found that conscientious toy breeders are absolutely delighted to have one of their pet quality dogs performing such life-affirming work. To have a certified service dog represent a kennel is a testament to soundness and excellent temperaments of their particular dogs. This is a wonderful option for breeders to consider when faced with placing a dog in a pet home. Obviously, all dogs--even some very typey ones--cannot excel in the breed ring or become a specials dog. What better life could a retired champion who is not going to be specialed possibly hope for than to work, get paid in hugs and treats and get to spend 24 hours a day with a person they love? And since all service dogs are neutered and spayed before being certified, there is no cause to worry that an intact dog would be used for indiscriminate breeding. It's a terrific opportunity for breeder and owner alike.

Our toy breeds have much to offer as service dogs. But it will take all of us spreading the word and heralding the success of those already working in the field before we are taken seriously. I look forward to the day when a cruise through the mall will gain me comments of "Oh, what a fine working partner you have!" instead of "Ohhh, look at the cute puppy!". It can happen!

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