Seattle Sights
Exploring new attractions in the Emerald City
Constant Companions

Assistance animals, their clients and their trainers create lifelong bonds of love and support | By Jim Gullo
On a chilly morning in downtown Portland, Oregon, earlier this spring, a college student named Jessica, from Texas, nervously waited on a Northwest Second Avenue curb, trying to summon the will to cross the street. She had never visited the City of Roses before, nor had she navigated many urban sidewalks since a condition called retinitis pigmentosa narrowed her vision to almost nothing. Crossing busy streets filled her with dread. At her side was a lively young black Labrador retriever named Makiko that had been training since birth to do exactly this: Get someone like Jessica safely across a street. The two had met only three days earlier and were just getting to know each other. Jessica took a deep breath to calm herself, gripped the dog’s harness more tightly and gave the command to cross.

At roughly the same time, across the country in Concord, Massachusetts (about 20 miles northwest of Boston), a young man named Ned was experiencing terrible nerve pain in his right hand, a recurring effect of the quadriplegia that had put him in a wheelchair. His trained capuchin monkey, Kasey, who had sensed the pain almost before Ned did, jumped into his lap and then lay down on the hand to comfort his companion; the ability of animals to sense and anticipate crises and painful situations is remarked upon by trainers as well as the people the animals assist. When Ned later dropped his iPhone, Kasey scampered down to the floor to retrieve it, and then picked stray crumbs from breakfast off Ned’s shirt and ate them. The trained monkey and her client have been inseparable since Kasey came into Ned’s life six years ago. “Kasey brings Ned joy and laughter every day,” wrote Ellen Rogers, Ned’s mom, in an email.

Such interactions between disabled people and the animals that assist them, as well as between these animals and their trainers, are at times achingly lovely and heartrending to witness firsthand. The variety of interactions often comes as a surprise to observers. Yet animals of different types help people every day in communities across the country—and they do so in many different ways.

While Jessica was learning to handle her new dog in Portland and Kasey was helping Ned in Concord, a trainer named Mary McNeight was working in the West Seattle neighborhood, teaching dogs to detect their owners’ oncoming diabetic crises. McNeight’s own dog, an exuberant yellow Labrador named Liame, was at her side and ever alert for McNeight’s

spikes in blood sugar, which Liame can detect by smell. In Wilsonville, Oregon (south of Portland), a multiple sclerosis patient named Sandy had her Saint Bernard, Janika, lift crutches from a Starbucks patio floor with her mouth, raise them high enough for Sandy to grasp, and then stand ready to serve as a brace for Sandy to lift herself to her feet. Janika’s trainer, Paul White, sat nearby and grinned. Meanwhile, families in Colorado and other locales were playing with and socializing the puppies they keep for about a year before returning them to the training organizations that had bred and would train them. And in Kahuku, Hawai’i, on the North Shore of O’ahu, trainer Judy Suan of Hawaii Fi-Do Service Dogs was training dogs to detect oncoming episodes of the posttraumatic stress disorder that their active-military owners battled, and to help calm their owners until the episodes subsided.

These events, and many more like them, are made possible by an intricate web of organizations and individuals across the United States and Canada who, for generally altruistic reasons, take part in and support the industry of raising, training, placing and looking after assistance animals.

The business of raising animals to assist disabled people—which began in Morristown, New Jersey, in 1929 with The Seeing Eye, an organization that continues to raise and train dogs to help people who are blind or visually impaired—has expanded into a nationwide grassroots network. This network connects a wide variety of people and animals in processes that begin when the animals are very young. In fact, the puppy that your neighbor is raising next door might very well be taking his or her first steps toward becoming a critical support for a person with a disability.

Today, dogs are trained to provide vision support for people who are legally blind through a number of organizations, including Guide Dogs for the Blind. Founded in 1942, this nonprofit organization has headquarters in San Rafael, California, and an expansive training facility in Boring, Oregon, outside of Portland. It is the outfit that bred, raised, trained and finally placed Makiko, the black Labrador who guided Jessica safely across a Portland street. Cheryl Vincent, a training supervisor at GDB, explains that the organization’s two locations work with approximately 300 teams of dogs and clients each year. GDB has a structured, multistep program that culminates with the clients’ traveling to one of the campuses for an intensive two-week tutorial focused on working with—and, importantly, bonding with—their new dogs. During the training, the dogs sleep in the same rooms as the clients and are fed by them. At the end of the two weeks, the dogs and clients go home together as a team.

In addition to vision assistance, dogs are being trained for a wide range of support: from helping people with conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder and autism to calming people in high-stress situations. Canine Companions for Independence, founded in 1975 and headquartered in Santa Rosa, California, coordinates more than 1,000 volunteer puppy-raisers and trains various types of assistance dogs. These include hearing dogs that aid people with hearing loss, service dogs that help people with disabilities such as mobility limitations, and facility dogs that offer place-oriented aids such as comforting people who deliver emotional testimony in courts.

CCI is a founding member of Assistance Dogs International. ADI is a coalition of nonprofit assistance-dog organizations that issues accreditation, provides public education, and maintains an international clearinghouse of organizations that helps match dogs with clients. Schools affiliated with ADI range from small programs in people’s homes to the Prison Pet Partnership, a nonprofit that teaches inmates at the Washington Corrections Center for Women outside of Gig Harbor to train...
service and therapy dogs. And the list of roles played by assistance dogs goes on and on.

“It’s amazing what these dogs can do,” says Mary McNeight, who owns and directs training at Seattle’s Service Dog Academy, founded in 2008. McNeight is developing an online curriculum for training dogs to detect blood sugar spikes in diabetics by utilizing dogs’ acute sense of smell. Using saliva samples collected from people with high and low blood sugar, McNeight can teach a dog to detect either condition, frequently before the patient notices it. She also once trained a dog to detect the early symptoms of a client’s oncoming narcolepsy episode to give the client time to move to a safe location.

“We’re just in the infancy of learning how to train dogs and utilize their skills,” says McNeight.

The world of animal assistants also includes miniature horses, which, like dogs, can be trained to provide companionship and safe movement for the visually impaired. The North Carolina–based Guide Horse Foundation, founded in 1999, has become a leader in training horses for service. And in Boston, Helping Hands: Monkey Helpers for the Disabled Inc., founded in 1979, is the only organization in the country, and possibly the world, that raises, trains and places service monkeys. These animals—with their bright minds and opposable thumbs—have abilities to assist people who have mobility impairments resulting from injury or illness.

Ned, from Concord, has a special bond with his monkey, Kasey. In fact, Kasey has been such an inspiration that Ned’s mother, Ellen, who provides care to her son and Kasey, published the memoir *Kasey to the Rescue: The Remarkable Story of a Monkey and a Miracle* in 2010.

Ned explains in an email the relationship he has with Kasey: “Kasey is a great helper monkey and does many things to help me that I can’t do,” writes Ned. “But what none of us knew before she came to me was how incredibly intuitive she is. She knows when I am in pain and wants to do whatever she can for me. She is amazingly smart and clever.”
Besides picking things up for him and helping him through episodes of pain, Kasey fetches bottles of water and brings Ned’s phone to him when it rings.

Because she is a natural tool user, Ned says, she can open just about anything, including bottles, jars and other containers.

Helping Hands Executive Director Megan Talbert says that Kasey is one of 161 monkeys that have been placed with clients in 38 states since the nonprofit’s inception. Besides currently placing eight to 10 monkeys a year, the staff of 12 people provides lifetime support to all the monkeys in the field. The staff also oversees a group of volunteers, interns and work-study students from Boston University who help out at “The Monkey College”—the Thomas and Agnes Carvel Foundation Center in Boston, where Director of Training Alison Payne oversees an extensive regimen of socialization and skills development.

The cost of this work, Talbert says, is a staggering $40,000 per monkey, all of which is borne by the organization through its fundraising efforts, with grants and corporate and individual donations. “We do not receive any government money or insurance reimbursements for our service animals,” she says. The same is true for Guide Dogs for the Blind, which estimates that the value of a trained dog is $65,000, but, like the Helping Hands organization, offers all its services for free to clients. GDB includes in these free services the costs of its two-week training visit. The bottom line is that the assistance-animal industry is almost entirely funded by grants and private donations of both time and dollars.

As GDB trainer Sioux Strong points out, these figures don’t account for the percentage of dogs (nearly 50 percent) that do not complete training programs for reasons as varied as being physically unable to handle the job, to being temperamentally unsuited to it, to not having the focus to work safely with a visually impaired person. The organization’s breeding program now works almost exclusively with golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers and mixtures of those breeds. German shepherds, the original guide dogs, have been phased out of the program. “Our success rate with shepherds...
was much lower than with other dogs,” explains Strong. “We made a business choice years ago to not use them.”

Dogs that experience a “career change”—a euphemism for failing to complete the program—might be placed with organizations that train other types of helper animals, such as rescue dogs or drug-detection dogs. Or they might be placed as buddies for visually impaired children or become nonservice pets.

Spend some time with service-animal trainers and you quickly get the sense that they are extraordinary individuals who are truly inspired by animals and motivated to help other people. Guide Dogs for the Blind instructor Crystal Lange, for example, has loved animals ever since she collected creatures such as frogs and turtles as a kid in California. As a teenager, she saw a man with a guide dog and was motivated to learn how to train animals to be so useful. She applied to and was accepted by the Exotic Animal Training and Management program at Moorpark College, northwest of Los Angeles, where she worked with everything from hyenas to camels. She joined GDB in 2004 as a “canine welfare technician,” or kennel worker, and was promoted to become a trainer in 2008. Working with the clients is just as important a skill as working with the dogs, she points out. “I love working with dogs and with people,” she says. “My job also includes home interviews, follow-ups, working the dogs and training them with people.”

Lange says this as she takes a break from training Pilgrim, a golden retriever who is nearly ready to be placed with a client. Returning to her job, Lange slips leather booties onto Pilgrim’s hind feet. Then the two of them go to work riding the escalators of the Pioneer Place shopping mall, one of many environments that Pilgrim must learn to navigate safely before he is ready to enter service.

A few miles south of where Pilgrim and Crystal Lange are training is another significant service-animal organization, based in
Paul White, a professional carpenter and circular-staircase designer, founded Service Dogs of Oregon in 2012 as a continuation of the dog-training work that he had begun in San Diego in the early 1990s. He came to working with dogs from a different track: When his late wife, Cyndy Clay, lost a leg to diabetes complications, the couple requested and received a service dog. The dog, a black Labrador named Napoleon, completely transformed their lives.

“He was a very amazing dog,” recalls Paul White over coffee. “He could pull her wheelchair, get things out of the fridge for her, pick up things that she dropped and return her chair to her. It’s difficult to describe all of the things that he did.” Not only could Napoleon retrieve the wheelchair, White says, but he could figure out complicated tasks such as getting it through a narrow doorway. “His greatest strength was his ability to learn.”

Napoleon lived to be 13 years old, and the experience with this dog led Paul White and Cyndy Clay to volunteer with Canine Companions for Independence, then to establish support groups and remedial training for people with service dogs, and finally to begin training dogs themselves, in the San Diego area. White now estimates that he has trained about 140 dogs and presently has 14 dogs in training, including three that are about to graduate from his program. Those dogs include a golden retriever that has been trained to assist an autistic child; a black Labrador that assists a high school student in a wheelchair; and Janika, the Saint Bernard that has been training to assist Sandy, the woman with multiple sclerosis.

White’s program differs from programs such as Guide Dogs for the Blind because he selects and places younger dogs with clients, and then trains people and dogs to work together through a two-year program that is largely conducted in their homes and in public places. In this way, he says, the dog and client form an early bond and work together at their own pace. White charges a startup fee of $250 to cover harnesses, vests, books and training equipment, and then $45 per month for 23 months.
“I don’t do this for income,” he says. “I do it because it’s my way of giving back for all the things I got from it.”

Talk with Paul White for a few minutes and you realize that he has depths of insight into dog behaviors and personalities that are not readily apparent to those of us who are happy just to get our dogs to stop chewing bedroom slippers. White speaks of identifying dogs that are predisposed to intervene in disputes; these dogs are especially good at helping people with PTSD. Nobody knows for certain if it’s a function of their sense of smell or a dog’s acute awareness and study of its master, or some combination of both, but these dogs can sense an oncoming anxiety attack before the client senses it directly; they are trained to get the client up and moving until the panic subsides.

The full impact of the benefits provided by a service animal to a client sinks in when you watch Sandy, the woman with MS, pull herself along with canes, her legs in braces and her service dog, Janika, wearing a leash and vest at Sandy’s side. Without even a command from her client, the dog calmly stands in place so Sandy can brace herself on the dog’s broad back and lower herself into a chair. Then Janika lies down at Sandy’s feet, awaiting further instructions.

“She’s God’s gracious gift,” Sandy offers with a smile at Janika. Per Paul White’s program of having a dog live with its client as it trains, Sandy and Janika have been companions for about two years, since Janika was three and a half months old.

Sandy begins to tick off the behaviors that Janika has learned and the supports she provides: “She picks things up for me—picks up my crutches and other objects. She opens doors for me with a special hook that I can attach to her leash, or she finds and opens an automatic door by pushing the button with her nose. She helps me remove my coat and clothes. She finds restrooms in public places. She finds the car.”

White adds that Janika has even been trained to trip the handset on a special phone, push the keypad with her paw and trigger an automatic call to 911 or a neighbor if Sandy is in a crisis.
In sum, Janika allows Sandy a freedom to function and to be more active than she has been since the onset of her illness. And at the end of the day, Janika is a companion and a loving pet.

“When her vest is off, she loves to play catch with a ball. But it has to have a squeaker in it,” Sandy says with a laugh.

On a cool spring afternoon in Boring, Oregon, a jubilant Makiko and her client, Jessica, are ready to graduate from the Guide Dogs for the Blind program. Jessica and five classmates came together two weeks earlier, lived in dorm rooms on campus and bonded with their new dogs as they learned how to work with them. All of the graduates except Jessica had previously owned guide dogs that had either retired or passed away, which is one of the harsh realities of working with service dogs: Their careers typically last for only eight to 10 years.

The bimonthly graduation program held on the Boring campus is not only filled with friends and families of the graduates but also with the volunteer families who raised the guide dogs as puppies. The volunteers range from an Enumclaw, Washington, family celebrating the placement of its 100th dog, to a high school student from Seattle named Delphine, who cries on stage as she hands over her first service dog, a handsome yellow Labrador retriever named Corbett, to a grateful recipient—Heather, a mother of three from Chandler, Arizona.

Another client, a woman named Erin, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, sums up the assistance-animal programs nicely as she receives her dog, Bamboo, a handsome black Labrador. “It speaks volumes to me about the heart and soul of humanity that you do this,” she says to the assembled trainers, volunteers and staff.

Then she walks off the stage, her hand on a harness, taking the first of many steps assisted by her newly graduated helper and companion.

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