A SENSE OF PURPOSE

A car crash left Ned Sullivan unable to do life's simplest tasks. Then he met a capuchin named Kasey. We visit Monkey College to meet a whole new breed of helper animals.
Kasey can keep her hands off Ned. Adjusting his hair, pulling at his shirt, chatting away, glaring at anyone who comes near him—he can hardly get a word in with all of her fussing. Ned sighs as Kasey nonchalantly peers into his ear.

Kasey is a capuchin monkey. Ned Sullivan, 39, is paralyzed with a brain injury. For the past six years, Kasey has been there to help with everything from the simple adjustment of a blanket and turning on the lights to even helping Sullivan sway his heart rate when he is in pain.

The 27-year-old special-trained primates is one of Helping Hands’ 161 helper monkeys, placed with people who have spinal cord injuries or other mobility impairments. Helping Hands is a Boston-based national nonprofit that raises and trains monkeys to assist people with special needs.

Everything changed for Sullivan in June 2003, the night his car crashed into a brick wall at 40 mph. Doctors told his mother, Ellen Rogers, that the force of the crash severed everything that connected Sullivan’s skull to his spine.

Immediately after the accident, doctors told Rogers that Sullivan probably would never move, talk or even breathe on his own. “There can be no expectation of functional recovery with a devastating injury like this,” she was told.

But with hard work, time, support — and what his doctors called a miracle — Sullivan, then 22, made a recovery. He can breathe and speak, has limited mobility in his arms, and is starting to ever-so-slightly kick one foot.

“Hello. Gaaah,” Kasey interprets, burlading the arrival of Guy and Bailey, the family dogs, before rushing to curl up just under Sullivan’s chin.

“This is her safe ground,” Sullivan says as Kasey sits on his neck. Sullivan’s phone slips from his lap as he talks. Immediately, Kasey moves to retrieve it. Her small, fingers wrap around the phone, fidgeting with the buttons on the screen briefly before placing it in his hand.

Helper monkeys can perform tasks that require fine motor skills, from scrubbing a nose, sipping a drink of water, repositioning bed and arms after muscle spasms, loading DVDs and CDs, adjusting glasses and turning the pages of a book. In doing so, they provide their human companions, who have limited or no use of their limbs, with greater independence.

Fifty monkeys are in training now in Boston at Monkey College, says Megan Talbert, executive director of Helping Hands.

“We get several hundred initial inquiries a year, but that doesn’t mean [the individual will] qualify or are in an appropriate home for a monkey,” Talbert says. “We end up placing eight to twelve helper monkeys a year.”

The monkeys are bred for this purpose in research facilities in Massachusetts and raised in foster homes until they are 8-10 years old, at ease with people and ready to begin training.

Monkeys typically spend three to five years at Monkey College learning the ins and outs of refrigerators and microwaves, how to turn lights on and off, and how to work a remote control.

The capuchin monkeys — selected because of their small size, intelligence and natural inclination to make use of tools — do more than help with chores. They give their companions a sense of purpose.

“We hear it and time and time again from our recipients: ‘I’ve got to get out of bed to take care of the monkey. He is depending on me.’ They have to think about needs outside of their own and that’s really empowering,” Talbert says. “Our recipients have had so much focus come back to their own needs and their own care. Now they have a little creature that’s depending on them for care.”

And there is a lot to take care of. “It isn’t like having a cat or a dog. It’s like having a three-year-old who doesn’t speak English,” Talbert says.

It costs about $40,000 to train and place a monkey from start to finish. Thanks to individual donors and foundation grants, recipients don’t pay anything.

“A lot of our recipients have injuries that have made them unable to work or have an income,” Talbert says. “The only thing we ask the recipients to pay for is monkey chow which is about $90 a monkey a week.”

It’s not all hard work at Monkey College. The monkeys’ favorite part of the day is the morning, when the television sets are Continued on page 8
A student enjoys bath time at Boston's Monkey College.

Holding out a fingerful of hummus, Migneault says, “Good boy Win!” as Winston, the 26-year-old capuchin, adjusts the trainer’s foot, which had fallen off its rest on the wheelchair.

“Winston prefers hummus to peanut butter — the usual reward,” Migneault explains.

Winston has had two previous companions and is almost ready for a new home.

“He should be with someone serious like him,” Migneault says.

“Someone who is in a quiet home. He loves to cuddle and to groom my head. He is a well-rounded monkey.”

Kasey and Ned Sullivan turned out to be a perfect match, but it didn’t happen immediately.

“Kasey is a diva,” Sullivan’s mother says as she walks around the room with Kasey clinging to her leg as if it were a tree trunk.

“It took about a year for the two of them to have such a strong bond.” Rogers detailed the topsy-turvy world of having a capuchin monkey join her already-chaotic household in her 2010 book *Kasey to the Rescue*.

Though a loyal and loving companion, Kasey is far from just a mindless servant. She’s intelligent (and willful) about her responsibilities.

“She would help out a lot more if someone [else] wasn’t helping me,” Sullivan explains. “Kasey, or any of the monkeys, realize what a person can or can’t do.”

Kasey will wait to see if Sullivan’s mother or another person will attend to his needs. “If I drop my cellphone, she is able to figure out, ‘Someone else is right over there and can get it.’” And often, Kasey just has her own agenda. “Sometimes she will just be a brat about it,” he says with a laugh.

Kasey chirps happily, seemingly in agreement, as she picks through Sullivan’s hair.

Kasey can select a DVD from the stack, put it in the player and hit “play.” Unfortunately for Sullivan, she always wants to watch *Good Will Hunting*.

Helper monkeys give the people they assist a a chance to live a richer, healthier life.

“A monkey looks at its recipient as: ‘You are my caretaker. My world revolves around you,’” Talbert says. “When monkeys look at their recipients, they don’t look at the disability, or what they are not able to do. They look at their recipient as the person that protects them, provides for them and will watch over them.”

“That bond, that purpose, means everything.”

Natalie DiBlasio is a Monkey College fan and a reporter for USA TODAY.