Meet a Monkey: Kathy

Kathy is an extremely smart, snuggly monkey who was Michael Townsend’s monkey helper for 9 years. (Read their story inside.)

After Mike passed away in 2016, his girlfriend, Donna, knew that she could not give Kathy the attention and care she needed. “I work with people who are technology dependent, and am away from the house a lot of the time,” Donna said. “Kathy needs to be with someone who can give her the attention and love that she deserves. She is a very loyal and watchful girl. Kathy actually saved our neighbor’s life one winter after a blizzard. She was over by the window and was extremely agitated. I looked out, but I didn’t see anything. Kathy continued to fuss until I went outside. I found our elderly neighbor on the ground where she had fallen. If not for Kathy, who knows how long she might have been out there.”

When Kathy returned to The Monkey College, she was welcomed by our trainers and monkeys alike. She is an extremely social and affectionate monkey, who loves to have her head groomed by her trainer. If they stop before she is ready, she will drag their hand back over to continue. She loves brussels sprouts and would even eat them frozen. Kathy loves to flirt with her reflection in a mirror, so her favorite toy is anything reflective. She also has a favorite sport—basketball! She watches the games and gets really excited when either team scores.

While at The Monkey College, it was determined that Kathy had some health challenges that needed to be monitored, so the team decided that it was time for her to retire. Because our monkeys are always a part of our program, we found her a wonderful retirement home with someone who can carefully track her health and give her all the support and attention that she needs. And thanks to your generosity, she will be well cared for and loved for the rest of her life.
Michael Townsend was diagnosed with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy at the age of seven. When he was 17, he lost the ability to walk, and at age 25, he lost the ability to use his arms. As his disability progressed, it became increasingly difficult for his aging parents to meet the demands of his care. When he was 37, Michael found an apartment and moved in with his girlfriend, Donna. While researching technology to help increase his independence, he discovered Helping Hands.

Donna shares their story:

One day I came home from work, and Mike asked “Would you mind living with a monkey?” I was like “Yeah, sure, get a monkey, OK.” Not thinking he was serious. He showed me the website, we did some research, and we made the decision together to apply. Kathy joined their household in 2007.

When we first applied, we were more focused on the things that Kathy might do for Mike, to help him with some of his daily tasks. What it evolved into was this incredible relationship. It was an outlet that he had been missing. He had someone to take care of. He had a focus in his life, now. Kathy was a constant source of companionship and entertainment to him. He was a best friend and a parent to her.

Kathy loved to push buttons—particularly on the TV, but was very opinionated about what they watched. If she got bored with what Mike was watching, she would change the channel to something she preferred, like basketball. And she hated dogs. One time, there were these dogs barking on a show on TV—she got really agitated and turned off the TV. And she looked very proud of herself for protecting us from the dogs.

A lot of people don’t know this, but Mike was very artistic. When he lost the ability to use his arms, he also lost the ability to draw. We set up a system that allowed him to take photographs, and he won a number of ribbons at the State Fair. We were the Maryland Peanut Brittle champions for many years. We did flower arranging, gingerbread house building, and other craft projects together. Mike would do the planning, and I would help with the execution. Kathy was fascinated, watching us with our crafting supplies. One time, we took up mosaic making. We sat at the table during the day sorting tiles. When I came out from helping Mike get ready for bed, I discovered Kathy had gone over to the table and was sorting tiles. I had no idea what she thought she was doing, but she looked like it was very enjoyable.

Michael passed away the evening before Thanksgiving in 2016.

It was very sudden. I was in the other room and Mike called out to say he was dizzy. By the time I got to him, he was gone. In many ways, this was the best way it could have happened—at home with Kathy and me.

With deepest gratitude,

Angela Lett

P.S. If you haven’t already, be sure to mark your calendar for the Annual Online Auction and buy your tickets for Festivale!