



# Tails for You

a publication of Can Do Canines®

**Thanks to your support,  
Alfred is bringing some much  
needed calm to Ava's life.**



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# NEW COMPANION PAVES A SMOOTHER PATH

*Alfred is helping Ava feel less overwhelmed and more confident.*

**A**s a bright, energetic, 10-year-old girl with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Ava thrives on structure and routine. She struggles to cope with sensory issues and transitions, and being overwhelmed sometimes leads to meltdowns. Since being diagnosed with autism when she was about 3 years old, Ava has been using multiple techniques and resources to help her handle emotions. Despite many efforts, she still experiences angry outbursts, anxiety, and stimming behaviors. Ava's family has limited activities to try to prevent emotional reactions.

Ava's mother, Diane, saw a story on the news about Can Do Canines, and the very next day, a co-worker encouraged her to apply for Ava to receive an Autism Assist Dog. Diane hoped a dog would help Ava intentionally choose to connect with a dog instead of reacting to overstimulation, so she began the process.

## He's All Work and All Play

The leap of faith led them to Alfred, a 2-year-old black Labrador Retriever, who is as playful as he is cuddly. Ava remembers being excited to meet Alfred, and when he came home, she had quite a case of the giggles. "He can be a little cuckoo," she says. Whether it's his full-body wiggle or the way he playfully chomps at the water from the garden hose, Alfred's antics produce smiles.



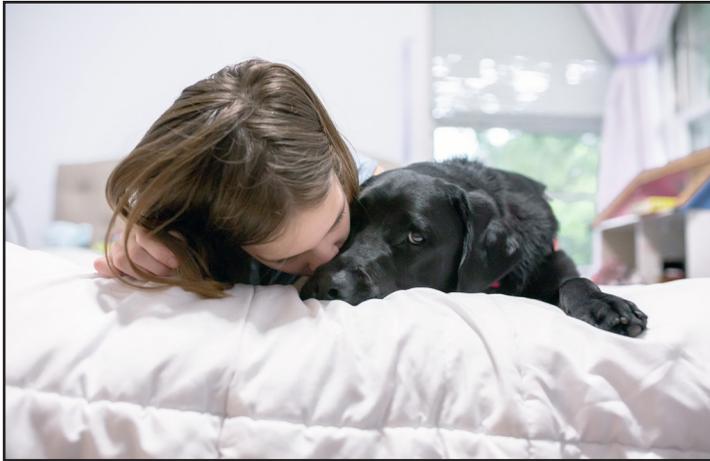
“Ava can just be herself and Alfred doesn't care that she has ASD; he loves her no matter what she is trying to overcome.”

The fun-loving energy both Ava and Alfred have is a perfect match, though Alfred's calm presence still balances out her heightened emotions when needed. When Ava is feeling overwhelmed or frustrated, she can cue Alfred to “snuggle,” prompting him to lie across her lap to provide light pressure therapy. Ava's siblings, Cameron and Hannah, even lead Alfred to snuggle with her before a meltdown if her canine companion isn't near her. The process has become even easier as Alfred's love has continued to grow for Ava. Diane says that he knows she is “his person,” and shares, “When you ask, ‘Alfred, where's Ava?’ he goes to her immediately.”

Snuggling isn't the only skill they've mastered. Diane explains that the “Ava and Alfred Game of Charades” started as a way for Alfred to teach Ava all he has learned and for both to practice the commands she needed to learn in order to work with Alfred. Ava wrote down every command from our orientation book and put those slips of paper in a basket. Daily she and Alfred would play their game. Ava pulled out each command (e.g., Visit, Snuggle, Nudge, Hug and Settle) and Alfred acted it out!”

Routine is a big part of Ava's day, so such a sudden major transition to online school really threw her for a loop. Ava's frustration and resulting behavior was escalating quickly due to being confined to a space with her siblings in their St. Louis Park home, but Alfred is now able to suppress any major tantrums from erupting. Since the start, Alfred has picked up on her frustrations and has helped her find her calm so that she can better communicate her feelings. The pair have established some routines together too. At bedtime, Ava enjoys reading to Alfred. Then, before they tuck in, they share hugs and kisses.

In public, Ava focuses on holding his cape's handle to stay safely with her parents. He bridges any social gaps with her friends, and ensures her comfort in stressful situations. “Alfred recently attended Ava's visit to Children's Rehabilitation Clinic,” says Diane, “and was so helpful for Ava's anxieties during the rigorous testing.”



As Alfred intently watched her during all the activities, it was as if he was asking her, “Are you okay?” Diane comments, “Ava knew that whatever came her way during that intense visit Alfred would help her get through it.”

## A Family Ready for a Fresh Start

Diane admits it was initially challenging to keep everyone in the family consistent in his training, but they’re proud of what the family has collectively accomplished. She says that Alfred is such a positive influence on Ava. “Ava’s attitude and confidence has improved since being placed with Alfred. Ava can just be herself and Alfred doesn’t care that she has ASD; he loves her no matter what she is trying to overcome. The bond that has been created is heartwarming.”

Ava recognizes the advantages herself. “Thank you for doing this for me!” she says. Diane and Kevin, Ava’s father, add, “We’ve been really impressed with everything from puppy raisers to the prison program. Plus the time and tireless effort from the trainers, and fosters, and all of the volunteers...you can see he was raised with love and respect, and we’ll take care of him.”

Autism Assist Dogs like Alfred give families peace of mind. Contact Cari Bishop at [cbishop@can-do-canines.org](mailto:cbishop@can-do-canines.org) for more information on how to apply for an assistance dog.

## PUTTING PRIDE ASIDE

*Once Kim was able to admit that she needed help, Icon was ready to serve.*

**T**he few, the proud, the Marines. This is a slogan that Kim, who enlisted in the Marines after college, knows well. She served proudly for eight years. It was that same sense of pride that kept her from applying for an assistance dog when she first began to need one.

Six years ago, Kim was diagnosed with Ataxia, a progressive disease that affects coordination and muscle control. Explaining the effects, Kim says that she could no longer write her name or cut her own food. In recent years, her frustration with the condition turned to fear. Balance issues from vertigo and double-vision made her avoid walking. “I was too scared. I didn’t want to fall.” Her inner battle made the situation no easier. She was a proud Marine, after all. She remembers believing, “I don’t need help,” but also admitting, “This was very hard. I lost all control.”

### An Iconic Entrance

Fortunately, for her sake, her husband, Jared, and two sons, Jimmy (21) and Joey (19), along with friends who

referred her to Can Do Canines, proved equally stubborn, insisting she try for a dog. In July, Kim was matched with Icon, a 90-pound Newfoundland-Labrador. “He’s so big,” thought Kim, upon first meeting him. Again, conflicting emotions got the best of her. “Can I trust him? I don’t know if I can do this, or what I feel,” she recalls thinking. But Icon, who has the brains to match his brawn, quickly put her fears to rest. “He knew everything,” says Kim. “Everything. He’s so smart, and so loyal to me.”

Kim thinks her acceptance of Icon was similar to when a parent welcomes a second child. That parent might wonder how it’s possible to have enough love to go around. Then everything starts to fall into place. In that same way, this big dog with the big heart won her over.

### Grateful for a Skilled Companion

Gradually, Kim began to trust Icon, as well as his strength and training. One time, after falling, Kim asked Jared to assist her. Instead, Jared reassured her to enlist Icon’s

help. “I didn’t want to do it,” she says, chiding herself, “Pride.” Icon was ready to “brace” for her though, as she used him for stability to stand. “It worked,” remarks Kim. “I was stuck, and it worked. I didn’t want help, but he didn’t care. He wants to help me.” With a conspiratorial whisper and twinkle in her eye, Kim shares, “I think my husband’s a little jealous.” Who would blame him? The newest male in Kim’s life is certainly vying for her love. When Kim has a migraine, it’s not annoying for Icon. His favorite task is to get the ice pack out of the freezer and carry it to her. Also, since the Ataxia sometimes affects Kim’s speech, she can’t yell for one of her human family members to bring her something. Her canine companion is always at attention though, retrieving the phone or another needed item.

Now, standing taller with a more confident gait, Kim says, “I don’t feel that fear of falling anymore.” The proud pair can be seen walking at least a mile together each day. They even go into stores—a new luxury for Kim, who only considered drive-through services an option before. She laughs when explaining the common perception she experiences from fellow shoppers though, saying, “They think I’m the trainer.” Once in Target, an older gentleman approached her and said, “I love Can Do Canines. I worked

“ I don’t think people realize how much it changes our lives. ”

for them for five years and trained Labs.” In fact, Kim has been surprised at just how many people recognize Icon’s Can Do Canines cape and comment on how qualified he must be. Most are also very respectful of Icon’s work role, but Kim admits she finds it difficult at times to maintain that boundary by not offering others a chance to pet her furry, four-legged friend.

Hanging in the kitchen of the family’s Mayer, MN, home is artwork that says, “Be grateful.” With tears flowing, Kim takes those words to heart. When asked to comment on what Icon has meant for her and her family, she says, “I may need a box of Kleenex. This is the best gift I’ve ever had. I don’t think people realize how much it changes our lives. I can’t describe it, because I don’t look sick, but I am. I didn’t think I needed him. I was too prideful.”

Now it’s Icon who is serving with a sense of pride, as part of a successful and happy team with Kim.



# HOW I'M ABLE TO GIVE THEM UP

By Linda Wicklund

## *Volunteer Shares Reason for Puppy Raising*



Linda, saying goodbye to our former front-desk ambassador, Zing, at graduation

**A**s a foster volunteer, I get asked all the time, “How can you give up the dog after you’ve spent all that time with it and loved it so much?” Read on.

The range of emotions involved with raising and training an assistance dog are vast.

Your heart beats faster with anticipation. You think, “What will the dog look like? Will the dog get along with my dogs?”

### ***Emotion: Excitement!***

Your mind commits to steadfast patience and consistency. You acclimate the dog to home and work life, going to training classes and outings.

### ***Emotion: Optimism***

Then you wonder, “What will the dog be happiest doing for their deserving person? Am I doing ‘all the things’ correctly?”

### ***Emotion: Worry***

Then comes “turn-in” day. That’s when your heart cracks open just enough to let a piece of it go to transfer your love and training into the heart of a dog that will give someone else the opportunity to live a more independent life. It’s a life this person deserves to have. Every. Single. Day.

### ***Emotion: Love and loss mixed together***

Next is Graduation Day. This is when it ALL makes sense! You finally get to see the person who received your dog.

You can tell by the look on their face and by hearing their story that your mission of selfless love and to “give back” has been accomplished.

### ***Emotion: Immense pride and joy***

And as the graduation ceremony ends, you suddenly realize your life has been changed for the better, too. Your heart has just enough room to fill the crack with the love of your next foster dog.

### ***Emotion: Gratitude***

So to answer the question, “Why do I do this?” Why do I continue to tear off a piece of my heart each time I hand over a dog in training? And not just any dog, but one I’ve incorporated into my family and work life for many months. It’s a dog I’ve diligently taught to be confident and love to do “all the things” to be a willing partner and friend for someone I’ve never even met.

After seeing a mother’s beaming face and feeling her grateful hug that her child can now do things with their family they couldn’t do before . . . or receiving thanks from an active school teacher who now—with increased mobility—can more easily educate others and enrich the community . . . or hearing about how the dog you trained now allows a person to confidently go out into public and volunteer herself, I can tell you. *That’s why.*

Linda keeps the essay *How Can You Give Them Up?* by Elizabeth Holman close at hand. The following is an excerpt from that:

*Let me tell you a secret: You will say goodbye to everyone and everything you love. It may be soon or it may be a long time from now, but the reality of our existence is that we keep nothing. Many of these partings will be surprises, and many will be filled with tears. As puppy raisers, we have given ourselves a great gift—we give your puppies up to life.*

*So don’t pity us or admire us as puppy raisers for being strong enough to give them up. Envy us for being lucky enough to give them up precisely this way.*

For information on how to become a Puppy Raiser, visit [volunteer.can-do-canines.org](http://volunteer.can-do-canines.org).

# YOU HELPED MAKE THIS POSSIBLE

(this quarter, unless otherwise noted).

New puppies born into our program

14



Dogs currently in for final training at our facility

26



Number of Can Do Woofaroo individual donors

630



190

dogs and puppies currently in volunteer homes while five of our prisons are closed



Teams that will be graduating on October 24

18



Active working teams who are currently receiving continuous follow-up and support from us:

350



## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Fall Graduation Ceremony - October 24, 1 p.m.**

[graduation.can-do-canines.org](http://graduation.can-do-canines.org)

**Give to the Max Day - November 19**

[givemn.org/candocanines](http://givemn.org/candocanines)

### Tails to Tell Presentations

[can-do-canines.org/tailstotell](http://can-do-canines.org/tailstotell)

Thursday, October 15, 7 p.m.

Saturday, November 7, 11 a.m.

Thursday, November 19, 11 a.m.

Thursday, December 10, 11 a.m.

Saturday, December 19, 11 a.m.



#### Our Mission

Can Do Canines is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for people with disabilities by creating mutually beneficial partnerships with specially trained dogs.

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