Sophia used to not speak very often.

Thanks to you, she can’t stop talking about her assistance dog.
You would have a hard time believing that behind 11-year-old Sophia Reither’s bubbly laugh and infectious smile was a little girl who, just a few months ago, had chosen not to speak. In fact, it might be hard to believe that she’s had to face many other obstacles in her short life.

Sophia of Blaine, Minn. came into the world with a host of health problems. She and her twin brother Nicholas were born premature and with fragile X syndrome. Weighing just three pounds at birth, Sophia later required eight ear surgeries (she still wears a hearing aid) and by age four was diagnosed with autism.

As a result of these issues, Sophia is a selective mute. When frustrated she’ll roll on the floor and refuse to get up. She may run away and hide, can be aggressive, and has an inability to self-calm, requiring intervention from her family. Sophia also has trouble understanding the world around her.

“For example, when we drive in the car, she feels cars are all going to run into us, even though it’s never happened,” Sophia’s mother, Michelle says. “She asks us the names of faces we see on billboards and can’t understand why we don’t know who they are or who their moms and dads are.”

Can Do Canines partnered Sophia with Rylee, a two-and-a-half year old black Labrador retriever as her Autism Assist Dog. Rylee’s foster home providers report that, “Rylee has been one of the most affectionate dogs we’ve fostered from Can Do Canines.” A perfect match to help Sophia break out of her shell!

Rylee is trained to help Sophia when she has a meltdown. Rylee will “visit” by placing her head on Sophia’s lap, or “snuggle” by laying her body next to Sophia’s to calm her down. At first Sophia’s parents had to issue a command to Rylee when a meltdown occurred. Now Sophia personally calls Rylee over when she is feeling overwhelmed, which greatly reduces the length of an episode.

One of the biggest improvements since Rylee joined the family has helped both Sophia and her parents. When asked how her sleeping has changed, Sophia says excitedly, “By myself!” In the past, Michelle would sleep with Sophia and have to get up whenever Sophia needed help, which was almost nightly. Now, Rylee takes Michelle’s spot, largely, Sophia says, because Rylee cuddles better than her mom. “I always wanted a sister,” beams Sophia. “Now I’ve got one.”
Sophia’s confidence has skyrocketed and it’s reflected in her schoolwork and her relationships with others. She talks more in class and is able to grasp math concepts that were previously mystifying to her. In fact, when her mom recently watched her explain the mechanics of a division problem, Michelle proudly observed, “And this is from a selective mute!”

After teaming up with Rylee, her improvement came rather quickly. “In school they say it is like a switch or a fog has lifted,” Michelle says. Not only is she performing better academically, she can also be her own advocate. If there is a problem, she can talk to teachers or counselors. The result is a safer experience at school. She’s also safer out in public. When the family goes shopping, Sophia doesn’t complain, or run off and hide. Thanks to Rylee, Sophia is calmer, happier, and best of all, she communicates. To everyone who helped make this transformation possible, Michelle is grateful.

“We did not know what Sophia’s future was going to be. The doctors didn’t necessarily see that there was going to be a future,” Michelle says. “Sophia now has an opportunity to be productive and to work. I’m seeing a completely different child who has the ability to learn new skills and help others too.”

The process of training a Can Do Canines assistance dog does not happen overnight. In fact, it takes more than a year and a half before the dog can receive its final training and begin to help a person on our waiting list. From ensuring our puppies come from the right background to raising them properly and then perfectly matching them with a client, your support makes the entire process possible. Here is a glimpse of how your involvement helps raise and train an assistance dog to enhance the quality of life for someone with a disability.

It all begins with getting the right dog from the start. The more we know about the dog’s history and lineage, the less chance that unforeseen health or behavioral problems will occur down the line. This important knowledge increases our success rate and helps us wisely use your contributions to make more successful matches.

Dogs are sourced from our own Labrador retriever breeding program, donated by reputable breeders, and when possible, are adopted from local animal shelters. Thus the breeds we use as assistance dogs vary. One of the largest dogs your support helped train was Baby, a 95 pound Doberman. On the other end of the spectrum was a four pound miniature poodle named Hobo. Interestingly, both served as Hearing Assist Dogs.

Shelter dogs present unique challenges because we do not know their family history and did not control their environment during their first months or years. So most shelter dogs are adopted as adolescents or adults and need extra evaluation of behaviors, habits and physical attributes.

Once young dogs enter our program, they begin our Puppy Program. More than 120 dogs are being raised and trained in our program at any given time. As we aim to certify more than 50 assistance dogs in 2016, this number must remain high to ensure we have a steady supply of dogs reaching maturity.

Puppies are generously raised by more than 180 active Puppy Program Volunteers. These selfless individuals

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teach the puppy good house manners, basic obedience and expose the puppy to as many social situations as possible. If the puppies aren’t spending their time with a volunteer in the outside world, they are being lovingly cared for in one of our five Prison Puppy Programs. The dogs live with carefully selected inmates who provide daily training and care as they grow up. The benefit of working with inmate handlers is they are able to give the dogs around-the-clock attention—which is very helpful when raising a needy puppy! Prison officials report that not only does the program help inmates learn self-confidence as they are providing a service for the community, but they report that the prisons have become a more warm-hearted place with fewer incidents of violence.

Perfect Partnerships

When our dogs in training have reached about a year-and-a-half of age they return to Can Do Canines for final training. The trainers begin by assessing the dogs and determining what they enjoy doing the most. Are they instinctively alerting to sounds? Do they love to retrieve items? If the dog is naturally attuned to a specific line of work, it is more efficient to further refine these skills.

Once the specific skills have been defined—and then further refined by our professional trainers—they begin training with someone with a disability who is currently nearing the top of our waiting list.

This is when the magic happens. Our trainers zero in on the challenges and needs of the client. The dog is trained to help their partner in specifically helpful ways—from using their nose to close the footrests on a wheelchair for someone with mobility issues, to alerting the human partner to their name being called for someone who is deaf. This process involves not only training the dog, but also the person. From teaching the client to give consistent commands to navigating safely in public with an assistance dog, the entire training process can take up to six months.

Can Do Canines believes in mutually beneficial relationships. So if neither the dog nor the person form a bond throughout the training process, the client is matched with a new dog and the process begins again. In most cases however, our experienced staff create a successful match which results in increased independence for the client and a happy life for a dog who loves to work.

Your support makes all of this work possible. Simply put, Can Do Canines could not provide assistance dogs, free of charge, without the tireless efforts of our volunteers and and the financial support from people like you.
The efforts of many individuals, from volunteers in the Can Do Canines Puppy Program to the organization’s professional trainers, are needed to transform a dog’s potential into a powerful force for good. And when the dog comes from a shelter or rescue situation, the challenges are magnified—but so are the rewards.

Just ask Kathryn McFadden of Minneapolis. For the past two years, she has volunteered as a provider of long-term and short-term foster care for more than a dozen dogs in Can Do Canines Puppy Program. A number of the dogs, including the one she’s currently fostering, previously lived in shelters or were rescued.

“Dogs that are bred for Can Do Canines go into puppy training almost as soon as they leave their moms,” explains Kathryn. “Rescue or shelter dogs might not get any of that. As a result, they could possess behaviors that aren’t desirable for a future assistance dog. In my opinion, undoing these behaviors can be more challenging than starting from scratch.”

However, that hasn’t stopped Kathryn from trying. In early April 2016, Sammy, a 20-month-old German shepherd, came to Kathryn as a rescue from The Sanctuary Rescue and Rehabilitation in Barnum, Minn.

“Sammy has a wonderful heart, and she’s very focused on me—most of the time,” Kathryn says. “Before I got her, she had the freedom to chase squirrels and rabbits, and it was a challenge to hold her attention while on walks. But she’s getting better at that.”

The effort to develop good habits (and get rid of bad ones) extends to public life, too. Kathryn and Sammy meet up with other Can Do Canines volunteers and dogs in training at parks, stores and other venues with high levels of stimulation and distraction. The dogs are exposed to people of all ages, as well as to other dogs.

“We also take them to our jobs whenever we can,” adds Kathryn, who’s a full-time landscape architect with the state of Minnesota. “We want them to relax during the work day. This can be difficult for Sammy, because she’s a very alert dog. We’re still working on that!”

Despite the challenges, Kathryn believes the pros of her volunteer work far outweigh the cons.

“It’s incredibly rewarding to see the dog grow and develop—particularly a rescue or shelter dog that otherwise might have been euthanized,” Kathryn says. “And it’s not just about a dog’s life that’s saved; it’s also about contributing to a better quality of life for a person in need. That makes me cry every time I think of it!”

You Can Train a Shelter Dog for GREATNESS.

Can Do Canines always needs volunteers to help raise our puppies. But more specifically, we need more great volunteers like Kathryn to help raise dogs and train dogs adopted from animal shelters.

For more information or to get involved, contact Volunteer Coordinator, Laurie Carlson at 763-331-3000 x113 or lcarlson@can-do-canines.org.
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.

YOUR DOG COULD BE A STAR
Can Do Canines is proud to announce our first annual Dog Video Festival which will debut at this year's Can Do Woofaroo. The festival could feature (drum roll please) your dog! We are seeking original videos of your dog which will be presented on an outdoor screen to all in attendance. See the enclosed brochure or visit can-do-canines.org/video-submissions for more information and to submit your video.

CONNECT WITH US
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SAVE THESE GREAT DATES!
The Fetching Ball
September 17, 2016
November 12, 2016
Tails to Tell Tours
July 21, 11 a.m.
August 20, 10 a.m.
September 29, 7 p.m.
Learn more at can-do-canines.org/events

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