



Tails for You

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Your support has
opened up more
freedom for David.

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David and Niles enjoy their new adventure together

Mobility Assist Dog Niles is putting on the miles. That's because Niles was matched with David, who is known for his love of outdoor adventures.

It was one such adventure in July 2019 that changed the trajectory of David's life. While on a biking expedition with friends, David had a near-fatal fall off a cliff above the Mississippi River. The accident caused a spinal cord injury, leaving David with no movement in his legs and limited use of his hands and fingers. He says that in addition to being able to weakly pinch items with one hand, "I can kind of hook things or scoop them up in my hand, but I don't have a whole lot of strength or dexterity."

Learning to use his body differently and to use a wheelchair took time. "In all, I think it was about eight months from initial injury until I was released back into the world."

As quickly as possible, he settled into an independent living apartment. Noticing a few Can Do Canines teams residing there, he was familiar with the organization. David had heard of Can Do Canines at rehab, "but everywhere I went, that was the assistance dog organization that just kept coming up," he says.

Although David was eager for the extra assistance a dog could bring, he says, "I wanted to make sure I was ready and as independent as I could be. I needed to be in a place where I could take care of him if something happened. Like if he needed to get to the vet if he's ill, I could navigate that."

Once confident in his own abilities, David applied and was soon paired with 3-year-old Niles. The yellow Lab was eager for this new adventure and the tasks he would showcase, such as retrieving items. David explains, "I drop things all the time." Reaching down to get something can put a lot of strain on his body and take a toll on his patience. Noting typical scenarios, he says, "It'll take me three attempts, or I'll get it up in my lap, and then I drop something else. So it actually takes a lot of energy out of me just to pick things up off the floor." With Niles handling the

pickup duties, David shares, “I’ve realized now how much it’s benefitted me to have him.”

Niles is also a superior doorman. David says that pulling a door open while propelling forward in a wheelchair is hard to navigate. Niles is happy to be able to help David conserve energy and decrease fatigue. Beyond the medical aspect, though, David admits that with having Niles, “It’s beyond the training. I think just having his personality and his compassion around has really lifted my spirits. There’s more joy in my life. I didn’t realize it would impact me this much.” Sometimes Niles will put his paws up on David’s lap and lean into him as if offering a hug. David shares, “It’s brought me to tears a couple times. It’s like, ‘Dude, I didn’t even realize I needed this.’”

David continues, “Freedom is something that has really opened up with him being in my life.” David not only has a manual wheelchair but also a mountain trike—a lever-driven bike with suspension—for accessing outdoor trails. As David explains, “It takes me out there into the wilderness.” And Niles is right there with him, sometimes jogging alongside, with the use of a safety attachment to keep Niles away from the wheels. The two have traversed Afton State Park and neighborhood lakes. This spring, they will say “Aloha” to Maui, where they plan to do their share of hiking.

Some of their trips have dual purposes because David works for a hiking company, compiling content for social media and videos, for which Niles is often a star actor. David adds that even on their way to outings, Niles is helpful to have along. For instance, if David forgets to take his keys out of his adapted van and has already maneuvered himself out, he says, “It’s easier for me to just point and say ‘Get it,’ and Niles will happily retrieve the keys.

David shakes his head when considering Niles’ journey to him. “I can only imagine the time, the passion, and the care that has gone into training and raising Niles to the magnificent dog he is. I just want to express my gratitude for everyone involved. It’s truly life-changing.”

And this is just the beginning of what will hopefully be a long, wonderful adventure for this pair of explorers.

Aeron Foote takes pride in lending a hand



“I’m a hands-on type of person,” says Aeron Foote, the Facility Caretaker for Can Do Canines. “If I don’t know how to do something, I can easily look it up.”

His Google searches are probably minimal because Aeron knows plenty and has been a tremendous asset to our organization since he started in March 2022. Whether he is performing maintenance on our vehicles, changing filters in the HVAC unit on the roof, patching the parking lot, painting, landscaping, or one of dozens of other odd jobs, Aeron gets the work done efficiently and correctly.

He had the added challenge this fall of helping get our newly purchased WAG Center up and running. Draining the pool, sealing doors, and preparing the home for renters were responsibilities he fit into his 15-25 hour-per-week position.

Aeron lives at our New Hope facility in an apartment adjacent to one of our training rooms. Given the convenience, he gladly pitches in to assist the kennel staff when they need an extra hand. “I like trying to make everyone else’s job easier,” he says.

That commitment to service was especially part of his life when he was in the Marines from 2012-2015. He explains that the military encouraged his practice of figuring things out for himself. Additionally, he credits his dad. “He has always fixed everything himself, so that’s where I learned.”

Aeron is “fixing” to be a full-time pilot. With Can Do Canines’ close proximity to the Crystal airport, he has a short drive to where he gets his flight hours. He expects to complete his schooling in mid-2024, when he will become a flight instructor while also earning a helicopter license. His ideal goal is to work for FedEx since the pay is higher there, and “Packages don’t yell at you,” jokes Aeron.

Despite what is on the horizon for Aeron, Can Do Canines is fortunate to have his can-do attitude and impressive skills in the meantime.

“Triple Threat” training approach proves effective

We at Can Do Canines pride ourselves on how we are able to custom train each dog for its future person, taking into account personalities, lifestyles, and needs. Lining our training room walls is a wide variety of wheelchairs, power chairs, walkers, and scooters to use while training dogs to best match what the client uses. We often request photos (what their medical bag looks like, size of their drink bottle, etc.) or video footage (a person having a seizure, a child with autism engaging in harmful stimming behavior, etc.) so trainers can imitate similar actions to familiarize the dog.



The three moms practice working with their dogs in a nearby Target.

Recently, we found success with another innovative approach to training. As three families of children with autism were at a similar point in the matching process, we decided to offer their one-week on-site training simultaneously.

Training on-site with an assigned Client Services Coordinator happens before each dog moves in with the client. This is when the future handler learns how

the dog has been trained, how to communicate with their new partner effectively, and more. In the case of an Autism Assist Dog, an adult—usually a parent—is the primary handler of the dog.

So for these particular teams, each of the moms of the child with autism spent time together at our campus during a week in July for joint training sessions. Client Services Manager Denise Yokom says, “Since the timing of these partnerships aligned so well, we had a unique opportunity to try something new. We knew the initial trainings would be very similar, so we jumped at this chance to combine them for everyone’s best interest.”

Although each family had its own Client Services Coordinator, the staff members rotated training duties, creating greater staff efficiency. The moms benefitted from hearing different perspectives from multiple staff members. They also had the advantage of watching and learning from each other as they navigated their training journeys.

Together, they practiced skills, dog-grooming habits, public outings, and more. One mom, Katie, said that training as a group like this “was amazing! I was able to see what was working well for the others so I could try it too. I learned so much more because they asked questions that I wouldn’t have thought of.”

As a staff, we fondly refer to this trio of teams as our “triple threat” group. Yet any opportunity to uncover new, effective ways to offer training is no threat to our future success.

A promotional poster for Can Do Canines' 35th anniversary. It features a large gold '35' on the left. In the center is a black dog wearing a top hat and a red bow tie. To the right of the dog, the text reads: 'The Fetching Ball', 'Celebrating Can Do Canines 35th Anniversary', 'Saturday, February 17 • Begins at 6 p.m. • Radisson Blu Mall of America'. At the bottom, it says: 'For more information and to purchase tickets go to candocanines.org/fetchingball. Tickets sales end February 7.'

A labor of love

Can Do Canines' Whelping and Growth (WAG) Center is bringing new life to the whelping process. Based in New Germany, the new state-of-the-art facility offers opportunities for community volunteers.



One such person is Patti Dougherty, who is a 10-year Can Do Canines volunteer. For the past seven years, Patti has served as a whelping volunteer, opening up her home to assist a mother dog with labor and delivery and to care for the new puppies in their early life.

Patti describes the full process: "From beginning to end, we would follow the highest standards of care for setting up the whelping pen, monitoring early labor, and fully examining each puppy after delivery. Once all puppies were delivered, we'd tend to the mom, clean the whelping area, and let the puppies nurse. Over the next six weeks, we would closely observe mom and puppies to ensure they were clean, warm,

and well-nourished. We also exposed the puppies to bio-sensory stimuli and enrichment play for healthy development—and all of it took place 24/7 in our homes."

With the birth of the WAG Center, that entire process now occurs in the new facility, under the watch of Breeding Coordinator Karin Balgaard and her team who can quickly intervene if challenges arise. In addition, volunteers like Patti now work manageable 4-8 hour shifts, in tandem with other volunteers in both the whelping and nursery areas.

The WAG Center space is mother-friendly, puppy-friendly, and volunteer-friendly. There are several sterile whelping pens, a spacious outdoor area, a toddler playroom, and a kitchen where volunteers can refresh and interact, creating a sense of community.

Dougherty believes the staff and volunteers bring the WAG Center to life. "Whelping is a magical experience," she said. "It's amazing to witness birth, to see the puppies open their eyes, to watch them grow. Now at WAG, it is even more gratifying to experience it all in such a beautiful space alongside other volunteers." □ Susan Byers



Special thanks to all volunteers who served as whelping homes in the past! We truly appreciate the hard work and energy put into caring for the dogs and puppies over the years.

To learn more about volunteering at the WAG Center, visit candocanines.org/volunteer.

Take a peek at our building updates

For more than 18 months, we have been reworking our facility tour experience to share the Can Do Canines story consistently, cohesively, and meaningfully. This facility tour project is more than a brand re-fresh. It is an opportunity to invite our community into our renewed space and give them a sense of the scope and impact of our mission.



Graduate Photo Wall



Wall of Honor



Journey of a Can Do Canine



Building Entrance



Programs



Volunteer Mosaic

UPCOMING EVENTS

More information on our website: candocanines.org/events

Fetching Ball Gala, February 17

Join us for an evening celebrating the amazing teams of Can Do Canines. Enjoy dinner, games, and silent and live auctions. Buy your tickets at candocanines.org/fetchingball.

Open House, March 9

If you or someone you know might want to learn more about us, check out our open house being held at our New Hope campus on Saturday, March 9, from noon–2 p.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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Cover Photo and David's story image: Liz Banfield
Fetching Ball Photo: Dyan Larson