



Tails for You

a publication of Can Do Canines®

Your Can Do Canines connection has formed Leah and Auggie's connection.



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Leah and Auggie share unbreakable bond

Twelve-year-old Leah recently had a major back surgery, fusing nine of her vertebrae with a rod in her spinal column. Fused by her side during recovery has been her new Mobility Assist Dog, Auggie.

Leah has spina bifida and is paralyzed from the hips down. While she and her parents, Ty and Jen, have managed well over the years, helping with morning routines has become more difficult for them as she has grown.



Leah and Auggie take a moment to connect before she leaves for school.

When Can Do Canines presented at their church in 2023, they were intrigued. Ty says that learning more about the organization, “ended up with us seeing the need for Leah to have an assistance dog.” So when the two were matched later that year, Ty shares, “Leah was in love immediately, so was Auggie.”

He adds, “We enjoyed the training! It was time-consuming but the trainers prepared us heading into the process. Having a fully trained dog turned over to us made the transition easy.”

“Leah and all of us love Auggie, and she feels much more comfortable being on her own,” says Ty. “Leaving Leah home alone didn’t really happen until Auggie came.” They emphasize that newfound feeling of security that being bonded with an assistance dog allows them. “She relies on Auggie now, not Mom and Dad.”

These days, during Leah’s daily bathroom routine, a black Lab is there to help her. Ty says, “Auggie has been most helpful opening drawers and picking up anything she drops, as she isn’t able to bend over while in her wheelchair.” Other assistance Auggie offers at any time is getting a person to come help Leah if needed, pressing push plates, tugging off

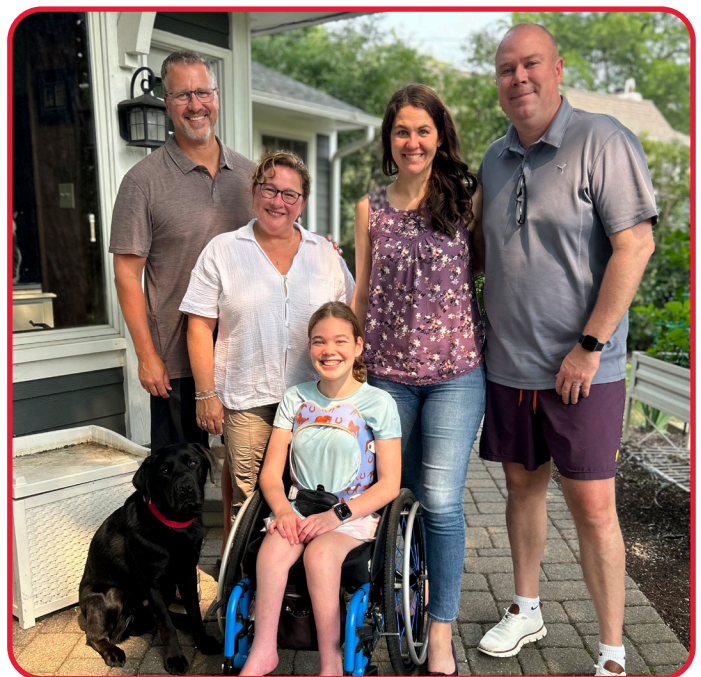
Leah’s socks and shoes, and cleaning up items into a basket. Ty confirms, “He is very bright, picks up new commands quickly, listens, and performs current commands right away.”

Accountability is not only on Auggie, though. “Leah has done a great job taking ownership of her new responsibilities with Auggie,” says Ty. “Watching Leah light up around Auggie is very fun to watch.”

One thing fun to watch about Auggie is his goofiness. They describe him as a “huge blockhead,” who “runs into stuff as he has no idea how big he is! He is very gentle” [though,] “especially around Leah.”

The family appreciates those who have made Auggie possible for them, with Ty saying, “Thank you to all the many hours the [volunteer] families and Can Do Canines staff has devoted to making Auggie perfect for Leah. Thank you to all the many generous donors who financially support this effort.”

Other people linked to this team are a sponsor couple, Dr. Kristin and Brad Davis. Kristin says, “My husband and I were so excited to have the opportunity to take a journey with a family to watch the process of how



Team sponsors Dr. Kristin and Brad Davis (left) enjoyed the chance to meet Leah, Auggie, and Leah’s parents, Ty and Jen.

a service dog can help the person in need and thus the other caregivers that surround them. I've been a pediatrician for 20+ years and wanted to learn even more about how service dogs can help the pediatric population. My husband has been involved in the medical device industry for 20+ years and wanted to see how a dog could be helpful in a human's life just

as so many medical devices have helped millions of others. The decision came from our combined passion to see people's lives change for the better, which is exactly what Can Do Canines does."

As for Auggie's passion? Changing Leah's life for the better.

Loving the dogs while loving her job



Stacy poses with a dog in final training.

In 2012, when Stacy Sheldon-Wilkinson was hired as a part-time staff member, she was one of only a handful of part-time kennel staff members caring for eight dogs in the Can Do Canines kennel. Since then, the kennel, where our program dogs reside in their final few months before being placed with a

client, has grown to host approximately 30 dogs at a time, with about a dozen full-time and part-time staff members sharing duties.

Soon after starting with us, Stacy began writing protocols for kennel responsibilities, and she earned the role as our first Kennel Manager. Interested in and encouraged by co-workers to serve in a dog-training capacity as well, she began assisting the only Program Trainer, who served as a valuable mentor. Stacy kept training just one or two dogs at a time until 2021, when she transitioned to being a full-time Program Trainer, joining three others who were engaging with the dogs in this way by then.

Working with a "string" of usually seven to nine dogs at any given time, she spends anywhere from a half hour to two hours every workday with each dog. It all depends on which Can Do Canine she is taking on an outing to a public place that day, the collaborative training she and other trainers do with the dogs, etc. Her first dog of the day (a rotating status) gets Stacy's longest time slot while the kennel staff is cleaning the kennels, so Stacy doesn't need to disrupt that process.

Stacy is known for remembering most of the hundreds of dogs that have come through our program these past several years. She particularly admires the eagerness that Labs bring to learning. Of poodles, she jokingly comments, "You have to earn their love."



Stacy checks in with a dog before taking their photo.

Can Do Canines never have to earn Stacy's love, though. She shares, "I love the opportunity to work with the individual personalities of the dogs and figuring out their strengths and what they most enjoy doing."

Though each client gets a "Cue List" of what their dog has been trained for, Stacy finds a use for her degree in fine arts, adding special graphic design touches to the cue lists she shares with the clients who receive her dogs. "I do love taking pictures of the dogs and sending them to clients. Capturing their uniqueness in photographs is really satisfying."

Finding satisfaction in her job overall, Stacy admits, “I feel it is a tremendous blessing to have this job. I’m very grateful.”

We suspect our dogs in final training feel equally blessed to work with Stacy and all of our talented trainers, who are making magic happen at the end of each leash.

Walking with clients through the loss of their dog

Anyone who has lost a pet knows that it can feel devastating. The compounding aspect of that animal being one that serves to provide independence and other necessary life skills can be that much worse.

For Can Do Canine graduates who experience the death or retirement of an assistance dog, volunteer Karen Kodzik is there to help. Karen began her relationship with Can Do Canines about eight years ago, hosting dogs and helping at various events.

“As my schedule shifted, I could do fostering less and less,” explains Karen. “So I reached out to, at that time, the person that coordinated client services and said, ‘I still would love to volunteer. I basically said to them, ‘Where’s your gap? Where is there a need? Professionally, I’m a counselor and I’d love to be able to support clients going through grief and loss.’”

With over 20 years as a master counselor for career counseling and executive coaching, Karen believes the pain of losing a job and losing a dog share similarities. “If anybody you’ve ever known has lost a job or is miserable in a job, there is a lot of grief and loss in that. And so, it’s very much a transferable experience.”

For the past six years, Karen has offered her services to clients who have lost a dog, walking with them on their journey. Willing to engage in up to three free 30-minute phone sessions, Karen says, “It’s humbling that these people trust and make themselves vulnerable to a stranger, to a volunteer, and allow me a glimpse into their moment of time to offer support and counsel and sometimes just a compassionate ear.”

For anyone who must deal with the loss of a pet, Karen stresses, “I can’t restate enough that people who are going through grief and loss give themselves grace and give themselves permission to grieve, knowing that grief has its own timeline, and to be gentle with themselves and reach out to lifelines.”

Fortunately for Can Do Canine graduates, Karen is willing to be a lifeline. She now has a Can Do Canines career-changed dog of her own, 9-year-old Ben, but realizes the additional anguish that saying “goodbye” to an assistance dog brings.



Karen and Ben, her career-changed Can Do Canine, offer smiles for the camera.

“The place that animals hold in our lives, in our hearts—especially for people who need them to be independent and supported—is unparalleled. The significance and weight of the grief people experience ... shouldn’t be downplayed. It is real. It is heavy. It is painful, because not only are they an animal, they are your companion. They are your point of support. They are your path to independence, and life will be changed when that dog passes. And so to have a place to come and start that journey forward, I’m happy and honored to be able to offer that.”

Building our capacity to serve

As we celebrate 35 years of empowering individuals with disabilities through the life-changing partnership of assistance dogs, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the donors and volunteers who have made this mission possible. Your generosity has placed more than 900 specially trained assistance dogs with those in need, bringing freedom, independence, and peace of mind to so many lives.

Looking to the future, we recognize the growing demand for these services and the need to expand our capacity. That's why we are excited to share the news of our upcoming expansion project, with a key component being the development of a new Birthing and Enrichment Center and Puppy Learning Center. This purposefully built addition to our facility will play a crucial role in the early development and training of our puppies, ensuring they receive the consistent and intentional exposure they need to shape them into confident and adaptable assistance dogs, while also ensuring the most accessible volunteer experience possible.



Flurry with her litter of puppies

We are guided by an ongoing commitment to providing each and every Can Do Canine pair with the most exceptional care and training possible.

Since we understand the need for responsible growth, this expansion is part of a comprehensive 10-year plan that prioritizes quality over quantity. The project will create a sustainable environment for

our humans first. The health of our puppies is directly impacted by the well-being of our staff and volunteers. That's why this plan includes investments in additional staff and volunteer recruitment in addition to expansion of the facility. We aim to gradually increase the number of teams we certify each year, reaching 70 by 2033.

The vision for this project also includes:

- A dedicated Volunteer Center for volunteers to safely and conveniently drop off or pick up dogs or supplies
- Two client overnight rooms to host out-of-town clients while they train with their new partner
- Much-needed space to allow us to grow and serve more people and communities, including:
 - A new veterinary room for our on-site vet technician and contract veterinarians
 - Two additional training rooms
 - Added kennel space for dogs in final training
 - Expanded office and meeting space for our growing staff

Our board and executive leadership team are currently in the planning stages of designing a finance package to fund this transformative vision. The package will include a mix of gifts and grants from individuals, businesses, and foundations who share our passion.

We invite you to join us at the ground level of this exciting journey by sharing your ideas and insights. Watch our *Howler* e-newsletter to take part in a virtual conversation we are hosting via Zoom in mid November to discuss this topic. Also, if you have connections to individuals, corporations, or foundations (locally or nationally) that might be interested in supporting this project, let us know. Your input could play a vital role in expanding our impact. Please reach out to Development Director Sheila Ross at ssross@candocanines.org.

Thank you for being an integral part of our mission. Together, we can continue to change lives—one partnership at a time.



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Join us at our next open house: Saturday, November 9, 12-2 p.m.



In this newsletter issue, read about:

- the vision behind our plans for expansion
- a volunteer who offers grief counseling to graduates whose dog passes or retires
- how Team Auggie is building strong ties
- a staff member who went from determining kennel protocol to determining dogs' careers



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

