



Tails for You

a publication of Can Do Canines®

You have given
Kelsi a life that
is more full.

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Yarrow offers Kelsi healing, courage, and love

According to Greek mythology, the white flowers on the yarrow plants symbolize healing, courage, and love. Kelsi, who was recently matched with Mobility Assist Dog Yarrow, believes that Yarrow's name is fitting. Although their partnership is just beginning to bloom, Kelsi states that "Yarrow already provides me with all of this and more."



Yarrow tugs open the fridge to retrieve a bottled water for Kelsi.

Kelsi is a graduate student pursuing her Masters of Arts in Occupational Therapy. She also lives with symptoms of what is known in the medical world as the "trifecta," which includes Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS), and mast cell activation syndrome (MCAS), as well as neurological symptoms stemming from traumatic brain injuries. On any given day, she experiences joint subluxations, spinal instability, muscle weakness, diminished grip strength, chronic pain, severe migraines, dizziness, nausea, anaphylaxis, and other symptoms. Kelsi explains that "the effects of all of my diagnoses combined have become increasingly disabling to the point where my body thinks it's running a marathon when really I'm just trying to do my everyday chores."

As a self-described "fiercely independent person," Kelsi had tried for years to push through these challenges, although doing so could trigger even more disabling symptoms. Feeling frustrated as her mobility became increasingly impaired, Kelsi says, "There were some things that I stopped being able to do on my own at all."

Hope begins to blossom

Kelsi felt her independence slipping away, and she knew something had to change. When she learned of a Can Do Canines open house, she made plans to attend. "I didn't want to get my hopes up, so I told myself that as an OT student, it would be good to learn about what assistance dogs could do for my future clients. Underneath the surface, though, I have to admit I was actually going for myself." She thought perhaps that since she was not a full-time wheelchair user, she was not disabled enough to qualify for an assistance dog. Yet, she was encouraged by a Can Do Canines staff member who told her that evening, "Respectfully, you don't get to decide whether you are disabled enough, that's our job so stop worrying about it. If you think an assistance dog could be helpful to you and that you are ready for that step, then you should apply."

"I felt very emotional knowing that the answer to my prayers was standing right in front of me."

So she did. Twelve months later, Kelsi watched in awe on her first day of team training as Yarrow and her trainer showed off all of the skills the 3-year-old black Lab had learned to help her. Kelsi shares, "When I looked into Yarrow's joyful eyes and saw her wagging tail indicating her enthusiasm for working, I felt very emotional knowing that the answer to my prayers was standing right in front of me."

The answers to Kelsi's prayers for independence are literally being delivered to her every day now, as Yarrow

brings Kelsi dropped items, retrieves her water and medications, tugs her laundry basket, unloads her washing machine, carries items, opens doors, and performs many other tasks to help Kelsi conserve energy. “Yarrow’s tasks help decrease the frequency and severity of my flare-ups and medical episodes,” says Kelsi. “For example, thanks to Yarrow’s help, the number of migraines I experience, as well as the amount of pain meds I take, have both been cut in half.” Not only is Kelsi able to accomplish more each day, given the energy savings Yarrow affords her, but she also requires less assistance from friends and family. Kelsi clarifies, “While Yarrow hasn’t physically saved my life, I think it’s fair to say that she’s saved my quality of life, and to me, that’s just as important.”

Kelsi’s future feels optimistic

Thanks to Yarrow’s assistance, Kelsi feels a sense of hope for the first time in years. “Overall, I feel like my life is full of so many more possibilities than it was before I got Yarrow,” she shares. Since receiving Yarrow, Kelsi has done many things that would have previously been difficult or impossible for her. With Yarrow by her side, Kelsi has gone shopping independently, joined a music

ensemble for the first time in six years, and begun her first occupational therapy clinical internship. “The love, laughter, independence, and unconditional acceptance that Yarrow has brought me is absolutely life-changing. Because of the help that Yarrow provides me with on a daily basis, I believe that I will be able to manage my health well enough to flourish in my career as an occupational therapist and help other disabled individuals live their lives to the fullest, while living my own life to the fullest as well.”

It’s no myth that the new seeds of independence that Yarrow is planting for Kelsi are already flourishing. “Now, whenever I call Yarrow to me, saying her name out loud is a powerful reminder for me of the healing, courage, and love that she offers to me every day. She is such a blessing!”



Yarrow retrieves Kelsi’s cane.

Kennel staff provide a safe haven for dogs in training

A day in the life of a dog in final training at Can Do Canines is anything but boring. The power of routine, combined with the care and attention of our dedicated kennel staff and trainers, lays the groundwork for an environment of learning, safety, and, of course, fun!

Planning for a dog’s move into the kennel begins weeks in advance. The team reviews feedback forms from volunteer



Raz scrubs the kennel floor.

handlers. Kennel Manager Katie Rickert shares, “It’s very important information for us to view how they live in a home. How do they live with other dogs? Do they prefer to eat at a certain time? If they don’t eat at a certain time, will they get sick? How are they with toys? What kind of toys do they prefer?” These details help cater to their time in the kennel and offer insights into who will make a good roommate and play-group partner. The kennel staff pays careful attention to each dog’s personality and rearranges dog combinations until the perfect matches are made.

Kennel team takes tasks in stride

On a typical day, the kennel team lets the dogs out for their first outdoor break with their roommate, feeds them breakfast, and then allows them to play in the yards. The rest of the dog’s day includes working one-

on-one with a program trainer on cues or practicing skills in public at a local business. Dog-exerciser volunteers give each dog a daily walk. Finally, the day concludes with dinner and more playtime outside before bed.

Play is an integral part of the dogs' routine, and thanks to the generosity of donors like you, we were able to make significant fencing improvements recently to our outdoor play yards. Assistant Kennel Manager Sam Quiel shared, "Now that the fences are fixed—they're lower to the ground—our dogs can't attempt to get out. And that right there is just so much peace of mind for the kennel staff."

The kennel facility is state of the art and exceeds all ADI standards.

The rigorous kennel cleaning protocol we maintain earned us high marks from our Assistance Dogs International auditor, who shared, "The kennel facility is state of the art and exceeds all ADI standards." The kennel staff vacuums and thoroughly scrubs the floors daily, cleans food dishes after every use, and sanitizes toys at least once a week.



Raz checks Copper's ears for part of his wellness check.

To stay on top of the dog's health, weekly wellness checks take place every Monday. These toe-to-tail examinations help the team note any health concerns or grooming needs. "When you're raising 30 dogs, someone's bound to have something medical going on. And if we're not checking them regularly, we're going to miss something," Sam noted.



Ara snuggles with Bueller for his decompression time.

The dogs' well-being is top priority

Despite calm, classical music playing, a kennel environment might be stressful for some dogs in the program. If the team notices that a dog is overstimulated, they will take it aside for some extra decompression time, customized to the dog's unique needs. One dog might want to snuggle one-on-one, while another dog may need a quiet space to work on a food puzzle.

The final training phase at Can Do Canines is meticulously designed to ensure that each dog thrives in a supportive and enriching environment. The dedication of the kennel staff and trainers, blended with careful attention to the individual needs of each dog, fosters not only skill development but also emotional well-being. As we continue to enhance our facilities and protocols, we remain committed to providing the best possible care for these remarkable dogs, preparing them for their future roles. With each wagging tail and joyful romp in the yard, we are reminded of the essential bond between humans and dogs, one that grows stronger through love, patience, and teamwork.

Karin Balgaard's Legacy Will Nurture Future Breeding Program

Many people are familiar with the saying, "A mother's work is never done." But what about the people who take care of mothers?

Karin Balgaard has been taking care of our mama dogs since she began as a volunteer in early 2014. Currently, she is relishing her last deliveries before she retires in April. Estimating that she has helped bring over 95 litters of Can Do Canines puppies into the world, she says, "The wonder of it all just increases."

The wonder of all Karin has done has continued to increase over the years, too. She accepted a part-time position as a staff member in August 2017 and was planning to shadow the Breeding Coordinator at that time for a couple of years. However, when that co-worker announced her retirement less than a year later, Karin, fortunately, felt ready. In addition to having assisted with whelping (the process of a dog giving birth), she had dealt with dogs' medical concerns, behavioral issues, and more. "I've done literally everything," she shares.

With an insatiable craving for constant improvement, Karin stretched her creativity and soaked up knowledge from research to bring new life into the whelping and puppy early-development experience for both the dogs and those helping them. She recalls, "I built wobble boards from the lids of five-gallon pails, I built swings, I built ladders, I built tunnels. I went to Home Depot and bought different pieces of tile and glued them to various boards so

[the puppies could] get used to all different surfaces under their feet."

Something else Karin built was a 7-week-old assessment, which helps identify assistance dog traits at this very young age. Additionally, she says, "I was able to bring to fruition the Fit-to-Breed Program that all of our breeding dogs follow."

Ready to hand over the leash

Although Karin admits "The fire is still there," and she will miss the daily interactions that have come with her role, she feels good about Can Do Canines' future. "It's my time to step out and let the next person step in and carry it all forward."

Her upcoming interactions will focus on being more available for her children and grandchildren. She looks forward to treasuring more moments with not only her human family members but also her horses and dogs.

Despite all that Karin has delivered to Can Do Canines, she shared the following in her retirement email to volunteers: "I have one legacy I hope to leave behind: respect for the incredible dogs we are responsible for, and compassion towards them. They give us their all, they strive to please us, to understand all that we ask of them. We can commit to learning and teaching others how to read them, to see and hear them. We can then understand what they love to do, elevate their life experiences, their work, their success, their hearts."

Although Karin's work will soon be officially done, her fire will light the way for years to come.





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Join us at our next open house: Saturday, March 8, 12-2 p.m.



The Fetching Ball

Celebrating Can Do Canines

Saturday, February 22 • Begins at 6 p.m.
Radisson Blu Mall of America

For more information and to purchase tickets
go to candocanines.org/fetchingball.

Tickets sales end February 12.



Can Do Canines transforms people's lives by creating mutually beneficial partnerships with specially trained dogs.

