

sdPets

June 2008

FREE

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Local experts talk about their field

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Doggy day care and pet-sitting options

Ferrets: friends or foes?

A look at the legalization debate

Beat the heat

Keeping your pets safe in the summer

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Canine Companions
for Independence



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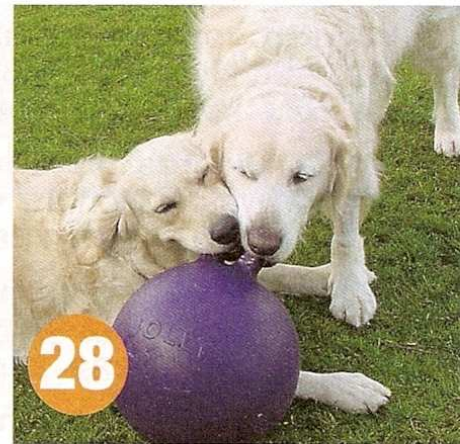


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On the Cover:

Jason Gackstetter and his special canine companion, Marisa.

Photo: Beth Mallon



Truly special companions

By K. Castillo

A dog is often considered to be man's best friend. The same goes for boys, too. Six-year-old Marisa is a great companion for 10-year-old Jason Gackstetter, a very social boy who has cerebral palsy and gets around in a wheelchair. Marisa is Jason's canine companion, a half-Labrador, half-golden retriever mix.

Marisa is also considered a member of the Gackstetter family, joining Jason's parents, Tim and Nancy, his 13-year-old sister, Rachel, and her dog, Liza.

Jason is a fourth-grader at Skyline Elementary in Solana Beach. Many students don't always know how to approach him and his disability, but having Marisa as a companion makes all the difference.

"She really provides a bridge. She breaks the ice," says Nancy, who goes to the school each year to educate students about canine companions. She says the kids ask lots of questions and it's a great way to "remove the stigma of disability."

With Marisa as a companion, "Jason's not 'the kid in a wheelchair.' He's the kid with the cool dog," says Nancy.

Jason got Marisa through Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), a non-profit organization started in 1975 in Santa Rosa, Calif. that "breeds, raises and trains assistance dogs for people with physical and or developmental disabilities," says Katie Malatino, public relations coordinator for CCI's Oceanside facility.

From Puppy to Companion

Each year, CCI places 200 dogs nationally with disabled people who need help and companionship from an assistance dog. About 40 dogs are placed in the Southwest region, which includes San



Diego. The dogs are provided free of charge to recipients who are known as "graduates" within the CCI community.

Before a dog can be matched with a graduate, the puppy is extensively trained by volunteer puppy-raisers who work with the dogs from their birth to two years. The dogs learn basic commands like "sit" and "lie down;" and they learn socialization skills.

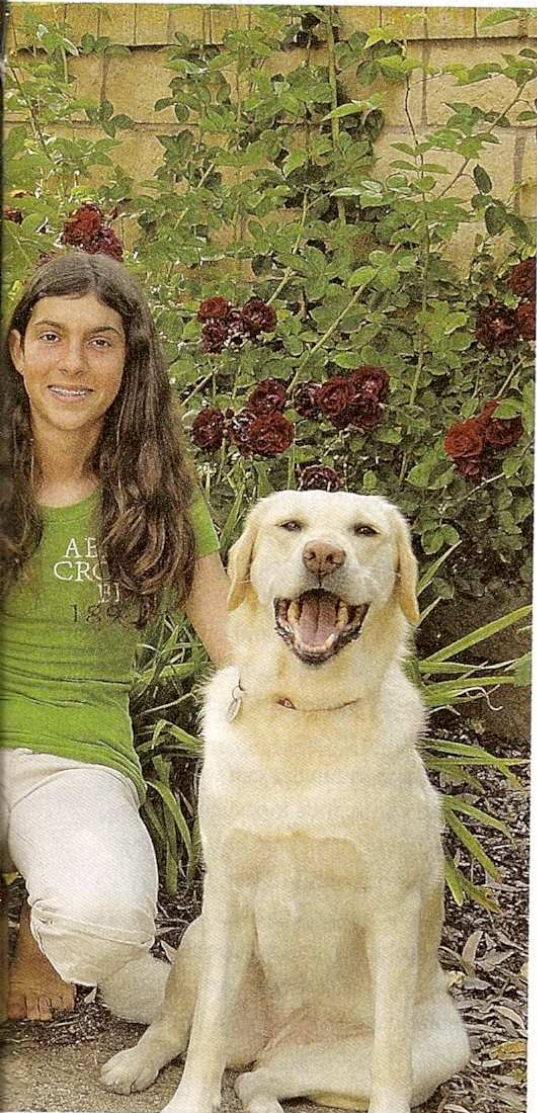
After that initial socialization and training, the dogs enter advanced training for

another six to nine months. Malatino says trainers need to be very committed. "It's a very intense program," she explained.

Following advanced training, the dogs are matched up with their potential graduate. CCI then trains the graduates for two weeks, showing them how to work with and care for their dog. Following the training, the dogs and their recipients formally graduate from the program in a public ceremony.

"It's an awesome, inspiring, emotional

Helpful hounds provide stellar service



BETH MALLON PHOTOGRAPHY

event," said Malatino.

CCI trains three types of dogs to be canine companions: yellow Labs, black Labs and golden retrievers.

"Their temperaments are perfect," says Malatino. "They have a natural desire to retrieve."

Every semester, CCI trains 30 to 40 dogs. About 40 percent of the dogs don't make it through the program. The dogs are still well-trained and sometimes go to service positions, such as working for



CHRIS KITTREDGE PHOTO, COURTESY OF CANINE COMPANIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE



KATIE MALATINO

Top left: Jason Gackstetter enjoys Marisa's companionship, along with his sister Rachel and her dog, Liza. Top: CCI Breeder Dog, Adah, sits in front of her last litter: From left, the puppies are Flora, Frea, Falzone, and Flanagan. Bottom: CCI dogs learn tasks such as opening doors during extensive training.