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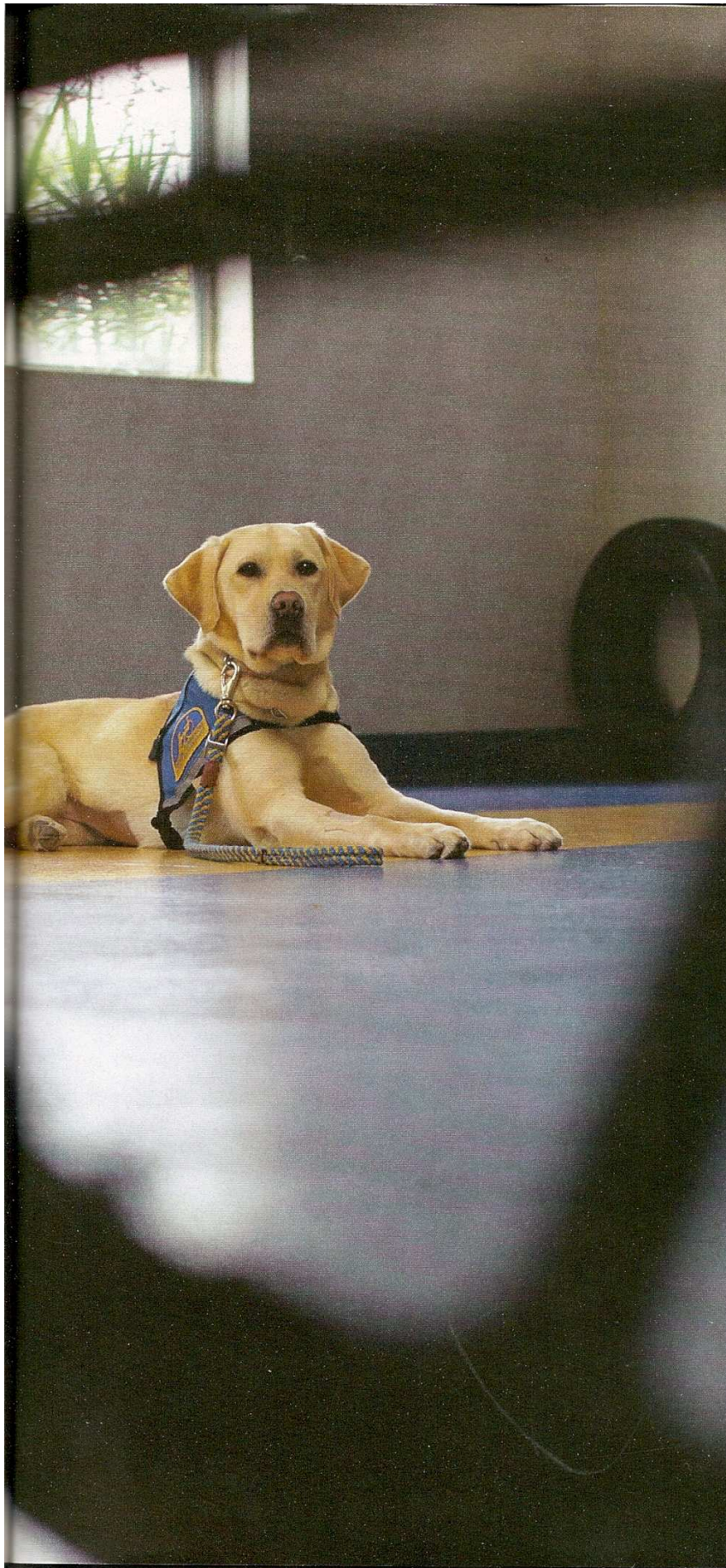
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**friends who
make a
difference**

CANINE COMPANIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE
DOESN'T JUST PROVIDE ASSISTANCE ANIMALS.
IT PROVIDES FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS.

BY DAVID L. CODDON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT DAHEY



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ASON AND MARISA are a team. They take care of each other. They go just about everywhere together, and they're popular wherever they go. Marisa, half golden retriever and half Lab, is 11-year-old Jason Gackstetter's best friend.

But she's much more.

"Marisa has turned my life around," says Jason, who has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair.

That turnaround began five years ago when Jason's Carmel Valley family, while visiting the Del Mar Fair, happened upon a booth for Canine Companions for Independence, a non-profit organization that breeds, trains and provides—free of charge—assistance dogs for adults and children with disabilities. Through the regional office of CCI in Oceanside, Jason was eventually matched up with Marisa, who is trained in more than 40 commands.

Marisa has helped Jason outside the home as well as in.

"Every year at school, we take the dog, and we do a big demonstration," says Nancy Gackstetter, Jason's mother. "It really helps the kids in the class see Jason as a person. It changes him in their eyes." The dog provides an important role in Jason's socialization as well as in the perception of others at school or elsewhere.

"She's an amazing bridge to the public," Nancy adds. "Instead of being the invisible boy, he becomes an incredibly cool guy."

This incredibly cool guy, a fan of both the Chargers and the Padres, also plays Miracle League baseball, an organized league for children with disabilities. At home, he feeds Marisa and does some of her grooming, "so when he gets older," his mom says, "he'll have more independence."

Jason and Marisa began working together before she came home with him. As part of the CCI matching and placement process, each service dog/recipient team spends two weeks training together at the organization's campuses, which are equipped with everything from classrooms to kennel and canine care facilities to a dormitory for clients. The residential program "is very intensive," says CCI spokeswoman Katie Malatino. "It's every day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m." and includes classes, written tests and field trips. "We get them used to ev-



Previous page: Sarah III. This page, from top: Dobson opens a drawer during training; Benisa learns to help with light switches; Canine Companions graduation; future companion-in-training puppy Hamilton III; Gamay; Carmen III during graduation. Opposite page: Marisa and Jason Gackstetter.



ery situation. We take them anywhere a client might go. We really individualize matches. We want to ensure it's a lifetime match."

Canine Companions for Independence was founded in 1975 in Santa Rosa by Bonnie Bergin, a pioneer in assistance-dog training. In 2009, an all-time-high 240 teams graduated nationwide, 50 of them from the Southwest Region campus in Oceanside, which opened in the mid-'90s and serves disabled adults and children in 10 states from Hawaii to Arkansas. More than 800 clients have received dogs trained in Oceanside.

CCI uses Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers and crosses of the two breeds and trains them in four service roles: dogs that partner with a facilitator and work in education or visitation programs or in healthcare; hearing dogs that alert their partners to important sounds; skilled companions that work with adults or children under the supervision of a facilitator; and service dogs that assist their partners with the tasks of day-to-day living and give them a greater sense of independence.

Each CCI puppy is raised by a volunteer for up to 18 months before entering the formal training program in Oceanside. That's when the work of trainers like Becky Miller begins.

"I spend six months working with these dogs every day," says Miller, who's been with CCI more than three years. "I have the greatest job in the world. I get to work with dogs, and I get to see these dogs change people's lives."

What is it about dogs that makes such a difference?

"Dogs are very emotional animals," says Miller. "They're good at sensing how we feel at any given time. They relax us and help us forget about the pain. And they're selfless."

Todd Young, manager of training in Oceanside, says, "Emotion runs down the leash. The dogs really get in tune with the handler. If you're not feeling up to par that day, the dog can help." He points out, "We really take pride in placing quality dogs with the right applicant. For us, temperament is everything. To be able to put that dog in a working role with that individual and to be able to match up the dog's temperament with the requirements of the individual... you need a little chemistry there."

A CCI dog, once matched with a client, trained and installed in the home or workplace, is prepared to assist the adult or child with the essential needs of daily life, whatever those might be. The dogs also come with an unconditional love that can't be overestimated.

"Cuddling," Malatino reminds with a smile, "is important too." ■

More information about Canine Companions for Independence: info@cci.org or 800-572-BARK (2275).

