



A helper and a friend

By Robin Bass

Amy gets a lot of stares. Maybe it's her beautiful golden hair or her sparkling eyes that cause people to smile. Maybe it's the way she confidently strides into any room. Or the way she dutifully gets down to business when there's work to be done.

Or maybe it's just because she's a dog.

But Amy is not just any dog. She's a Golden Retriever mixed with just a hint of Labrador, which according to Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) is the perfect combination for a service dog. Since the organization was founded 30 years ago, nearly 2,500 service dogs have been placed with individuals across the nation who have physical limitations. And now one is here in Spencer County.

Amber Barnes, 23, of Mt. Eden was recently presented with Amy after an intense two-week training schedule. From morning to night, Monday through Saturday, the pair worked on skills that would help Amber become less reliant on people - and more reliant on Amy.

The Accident

Simple things like picking up her keys or pulling open doors have become quite a chore for Amber since her car accident nearly six years ago. She was a senior at Spencer County High School and was merely two weeks from turning eighteen.

She was on her way to a cheerleading competition when her car ran off the road less than a mile from her house. Police reports car flipped several times and Amber was ejected from the vehicle.

David Barnes, Amber's father, remembers that emergency workers weren't even sure Amber was going to live through the ride hospital.

"They say I'm a complete quadriplegic," said Amber, "I can sit there and feel sorry for myself, but it's not doing anyone any good."

Unlike a clinically defined quadriplegic, Amber can move her arms, she just can't move individual fingers.

"There are a lot worse things that could have happened," said David, "God has a purpose for everything. We might not ever know it in our lifetime, but she's still Amber. There's no doubt in my mind that the Lord has blessed Amber. There was many times we could have died."

The Recovery

It was while Amber was being treated at Frazier Rehabilitation Center that she was first introduced to the notion of service dogs long before she started filling out applications and going through interviews.

"There are just so many people who need these dogs," said Amber, "and the people who already have dogs, if they retire their sick and died, they got priority over people who have never had a dog."

Because of the high demand for service dogs in the country, Amber remained on a waiting list for over five years.

"After the interview, every semester before I started school I would e-mail them and ask if I was going to be invited to training. I said she wanted the dog so much that she was willing to drop out a semester of school at a moment's notice if CCI approved her."



photo by ROBIN BASS College student Amber Mt. Eden has only been around her service dog less than three months, but the pair have become companions. Amy has been specially trained to help Amber with daily activities such as picking up items and opening or closing doors.

The Companion

The day finally came last November when Amber, her mother, and their three Boston Terriers loaded up the van and headed for Ohio. The training wasn't easy, especially since it was Amber who was really getting all the instructions.

"On the last day they have a graduation and the puppy raisers give the dog over to me," said Amber as she looks through a photo of the event.

With less than three months living with Amy, Amber can already see how the dog will impact her life.

"This will help me be more of an independent person. Before I was more dependent on other people to pick up things. I think she's able to help me a bunch."

Amy has been taught 39 commands that range from turning light switches on and off to sitting quietly under a table or desk.

"Sometimes it's frustrating because she doesn't always do what she's told. She's like any other dog. She has behaviors that need to be corrected," said Amber.

"I think more than anything she is a companion to Amber. Wherever Amber is, she is," said David Barnes, Amber's father.

Amber said Amy has become both her helper and her companion since they became a pair. They go everywhere together. While Amy must wear a specially designed backpack that clearly identifies her as a working dog. Amber said she also carries around informational brochures if store or restaurant owners have questions.

"I went to Wendy's one time and these people moved away from us because they said they were not eating by a dog. They even asked the manager and asked if I was allowed to have that dog in there because it wasn't sanitary. It made me mad but I have to represent CCI so I have to just ignore it."

But for the most part, everyone that meets Amy falls in love with her and asks to pet her, especially her college classmates.

"If she's not working, she just loves to get in and bed and lay with you. But she loves working, too. She's such a lovable dog and a great companion. I'm just really thankful that I have her," said Amber.