

Sections

- Home Page
- In The News
- Sports
- Kid Links
- Obituaries
- Classifieds
- Opinion
- Links/Sites of Interest
- Newsstands
- Subscribe
- Message Board
- Article Search
- Make Us Your Home
- Contact Us
- Advertisers Media Kit

Special Sections

[Senior Life 2005](#)

[Bridal Guide](#)

[Discover 2005](#)

[Medical Directory 2005](#)

[Perry County 4-H Fair Results](#)

[Schweizer Zeitung](#)

[Neighbors October 2005](#)

[Fall 2005 Car Care](#)

[Christmas Kickoff 2005](#)

[Holiday Recipes](#)

[Last-minute Gift Guide](#)

World News

World News

Entertainment

TownNews

Entertainment

Search Classifieds

Keyword:

[advanced search](#)

In The News

Two companions who care

Tell City woman and her dog come to rely on each other

A lifetime fight against spinal bifida often makes it hard for Jennifer Paris to perform everyday tasks the rest of us take for granted. Simply reaching down to open a drawer or picking up a pair of shoes or a newspaper from the floor become major challenges.

But for the past month and a half, the 53-year-old Tell City woman hasn't had to look far for a helping hand: even if the aid comes in the form of four paws, a warm snout and a wagging tail.



Neilson, Jennifer Paris' labrador retriever, is trained to help with everyday tasks and likes to snuggle. (Story and photos by [Vince Luecke](#).)

Neilson, a soon-to-be-2-year-old golden Lab, is Paris' companion, a specially-trained service canine provided by a national group that matches dogs with children and adults with physical disabilities.

"We make a good team, I think," Paris says in the lobby of Twilight Towers, where she lives. She and Neilson first met in November during a two-week orientation class organized by Canine Companions for Independence.

The two have been together since November, a short time but plenty long enough for a lasting friendship to build. "I'm doing my best to learn and he is, too," she said. "It's working well."

People with spinal bifida (an incomplete closure in the spinal column) face muscle weakness and in severe cases, paralysis. Jennifer was diagnosed with the condition as a child and although she worked as a parole officer for many years, the effects of the disease eventually grew to be too taxing. She now relies on a wheelchair to get around when outside her first-floor apartment.

Enter Neilson: a service dog trained to help with chores. Jennifer knew about service dogs trained to help folks with physical disabilities for several years and had inquired with individuals who train animals. But those efforts didn't pan out. Then she heard about Canine Companions.

Accepted into the program, Jennifer was invited in November to the organization's north-central development center in Delaware, Ohio. There, she and several others who were selected to receive assistance dogs devoted the first two days to meeting and mixing with a number of Labs, golden retrievers

Online Poll

Tell City Mayor Gayle Strassell wants to examine efficiency gains and reductions in political pressures that might result from a restructuring of city utilities. All but one council member said they should remain in charge of the utilities. Who is right?

- The mayor
- The council members
- I am not sure

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The dog knows how to hit the control button opening doors at Twilight Towers, where Paris resides.

and crosses between the two breeds.

"I think they wanted to see how we interacted with different dogs there," Jennifer said about the first phase of the two-week session. On the third day, trainers made their decisions. Neilson was her match.

Canine Companions screens candidates for assistance dogs, giving them a good grasp of what skills her dog needed. "Our trainers work with the animals and know each dog's strengths and weaknesses," said Judy Myers, north-central development director for Canine Companions.

The match has proved to be ideal. Back at Twilight Towers, Neilson trails Jennifer's motorized wheelchair. "Behind," she says gently, a prompt for Neilson to slide in behind the chair as Jennifer goes through a set of automatic doors.

Tugging on a rope affixed to a doorknob, Neilson has no problem closing the door to Jennifer's apartment. He can do the same for dresser drawers. The dog is gentle and patient, gingerly picking up items in his mouth. It's no accident Neilson is gentle. "They're trained to pick up a piece of celery without leaving a mark," she says.

Neilson lives a more regimented life than many dogs. There are set times for play and eating. But there are spontaneous moments, such as when Jennifer reaches for the grooming brush, a moment of bonding Neilson is especially fond of.

Neilson has been a welcome addition to life at Twilight Towers and other residents, from Jennifer's neighbors to the men and women eating lunch together, have welcomed Neilson to the close circle of residents.

"Everyone asks if they can pet him," Jennifer says. "He's friendly."

Friendly and polite. The dogs are trained to be inconspicuous. When Jennifer eats downstairs, Neilson usually parks himself a foot or two away under the table.

Bobbie Polster, director of the Tell City Housing Authority, agrees the match has been a good one, for Jennifer and in lesser ways, for the entire community at Twilight Towers. "It's been great for her, but everyone seems to like having (Neilson) around," she said.

For more information about Canine Companions, visit <http://www.cci.org> .

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