

Barking up the right tree

THE BENEFITS OF SERVICE ANIMALS

My service dog's liquid eyes say it all: *I'm here. I love you. What can I do to help?* Top that off with some serious entertainment value, and how much more could I ask of a friend?

Mesa is two parts dignity, one part goof. She prances in step as she heels, drops money into the hands of astonished cashiers and lands like a powder puff at my feet whenever she thinks I've stopped moving long enough to justify her getting up again. But she also gulps grasshoppers and suffers from an intractable kissing compulsion. Children are her favorite flavor, and her tail waves longingly whenever one strays within licking distance.

This *dog who loves too much* has caused quite a stir locally. Each time Mesa scoops up my fumbled shopping list or emerges from beneath a restaurant table after a meal, someone gasps, comments or asks questions. "Oh, look!" I hear often. "It's that golden retriever who *pays!*" Her mere presence is worthy of note—even when she sleeps right through the action. "Eighty-eight plus one dog" was the official attendance count at church last Sunday.

Uncannily, Mesa matches her pace to my maddening cycle of flare-ups and quiescence. When my autoimmune symptoms are in full swing, she snoozes next to our therapy pool while I soothe my swollen joints in the warm water. When the inflammation inexplicably settles and I feel almost normal again, she scampers along on hikes and dances her way through family water-balloon fights. And she smiles. Widely. A big, toothy grin of undeniable delight that makes her look for all the world like she's happy to see me up and around again.

Now that I'm enjoying the benefits of my partnership with *Little Mesa Annie*, I wish I'd known years ago that I qualified for a service dog. Even during flares of bilateral hip-joint effusions—when I was barely ambulatory on the crutches I used sparingly to preserve my *better* hip—I still assumed such dogs were reserved for people who used wheelchairs. That's why I originally set out to find a rare *released* dog—one who falls short of assistance-dog standards *and* is not re-trained for another job like bomb detection *and* is not adopted by the puppy-raisers who earned first dibs by voluntarily providing its early care and socialization. I was hoping for a calm pet marred for service duty by, say, an unrepentant proclivity toward chasing squirrels.



But when I called Jana Edmondson, executive director of not-for-profit Canine Co-Pilots in Flagstaff, Arizona, I discovered that full-fledged service dogs can help those of us with invisible or less obvious disabilities—such as my particular form of autoimmune arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis.

Edmondson told me that the sight of a service dog in public tends to part crowds, thereby reducing the handler's risk of being jostled or knocked off balance. When dogs retrieve or carry items, their human counterparts' energy is preserved. Larger dogs can offer supportive bracing to help their partners stand up, and counterbalance to steady them while walking. Canine companionship, getting out more often and the inevitable conversations resulting from having a working dog in public, combat loneliness, explained Edmondson, who has placed 10 service dogs since starting Canine Co-Pilots in 2004.

I was convinced, but still hesitant to apply, for fear I would prevent someone with less independence from receiving a dog he or she desperately needed.

That's a common myth among paraplegics, amputees and others who consider themselves comparatively mobile, says Clark Pappas, national director of participant programs for the Santa Rosa, California-based Canine Companions for Independence, which has placed more than 2,500 service and hearing dogs since 1975. "They say, 'I'm independent enough. I'll let the dog go to someone more disabled.'"

The truth is, applicants at opposite ends of the ability spectrum are not competing for the same dogs, says Pappas, who has been affiliated with not-for-profit CCI for 18 years. Only a small fraction of dogs are suitable for clients who cannot exert physical control over them, while the majority of dogs require handlers with strength, dexterity and assertive voices. There is therefore a dichotomy in the demand for assistance dogs, says Pappas. "The demand for dogs for quadriplegics is intense, while we're actually recruiting applicants who are less limited. This is a common industry trend."

Diane Little Eagle of Palmer, Arkansas, says she had no idea she qualified for a service dog and would not have acquired three-year-old Caroline, a golden retriever with a sunny disposition, if someone else had not applied on her behalf. Although canines of various breeds and mixes have been trained as assistance dogs, many are golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers or crosses thereof. Now, after more than a year with Caroline, Little Eagle says it's difficult to imagine life without her.

In 2001, Little Eagle was just starting to climb down from a friend's loft, when the ladder she was stepping onto fell backwards to the first floor far below. Her

wrists, arms, ribs and back were shattered. The following two years were a blur of body casts, hospitalizations, surgeries and physical therapy. At some point, unknown to her, somebody submitted an application for a service dog. "I had so many helpers in the hospital. I don't even know who applied."

By June of 2005, when Little Eagle received Caroline from Canine Co-Pilots, she could clearly see the benefits. "I used to get stuck in public bathrooms. The doors were so heavy. I'd wait and wait until someone would come and get me out. Now, Caroline opens the doors for me." Caroline's retrieval skills are essential to Little Eagle's independence, because Little Eagle cannot bend over. "She picks everything up for me."

Like Mesa, Caroline adapts easily to change. One day, the house is full of nieces and nephews. The next, it's silent. Little Eagle plays loud drums constantly during powwows that last for days. Through it all, *Sweet Caroline* is by her side.

Initially, it was doubtful Little Eagle would walk again. Now, she takes frequent treks with Caroline—despite an unsteady gait and unsure footing—helping preserve her mobility over the long haul. "When it's icy, Caroline knows to be right there. If I didn't keep walking, I might lose my ability to do that."

Caroline has expanded Little Eagle's world in other ways. "I know what it's like to be isolated. People look at you funny because you walk funny. A service dog not only helps physically, it helps with that incredible isolation—people who would usually not talk to you, talk to you. Even grumpy people smile."

Children, in particular, approach Little Eagle and Caroline in public. "Kids will come up and tell me about how a person or a pet dog died. They pet her, and it's like they're telling her their story. She's a real vehicle for healing."

Others have also noticed the emotional benefits service animals bring, and there is a growing movement in some areas to recognize dogs purely for the psychological assistance they bring. Within that mystifying realm of dogs and emotional healing, however, a controversy rages about whether these *emotional support* dogs meet the definition of *service animal*.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), "Service animal means any guide dog, signal dog or other animal individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability..."

Most would agree that a dog like Caroline qualifies under that regulatory language as a *service animal* because she assists Little Eagle in overcoming hurdles posed by her physical disability. Caroline is a generally accepted extension of her handler, much like a power chair is an extension of someone with paralysis.

But what if the handler's disability is mental illness? Can animals really perform tasks to mitigate that form of disability, and therefore entitle their partners to take them everywhere traditional assistance animals are permitted to go?

Yes, but only if the animal performs disability-related tasks or provides a therapeutic function, is trained in basic obedience and public-access skills, and is recommended in writing by a physician—preferably a psychiatrist—for a person with mental illness, says Joan Esnayra, PhD, president of the Arlington, Virginia-based Psychiatric Service Dog Society (PSDS), a not-for-profit since 2003. “You can't just slap a vest on your dog and go on your merry way.”

Diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 1996, Esnayra was surprised when her male Rhodesian ridgeback, Wasabe, began bumping her elbow to alert her to behaviors signaling emerging hypo-manic episodes that she could not see coming. “It was reliable, and it was specific. That information was so valuable to me.”

Esnayra assumed such mental health support from dogs was common and searched online to learn more. Finding nothing, she started an online discussion group that grew rapidly. In 2002, she launched PSDS to educate others, promote research, develop a national network of professional trainers and advocate for public-access rights. “We want to be legitimate, legal, responsible service-dog community members, but also get the help that works for us.”

What's working for Esnayra these days is 18-month-old Kenji, also a Rhodesian ridgeback. She says pacing her breathing to his reduces her restlessness and anxiety.

“He is very responsive to me. When I'm going through a mood cycle, he sticks to me like glue.”



Pappas of CCI says the ADA's vague wording regarding tasks and service animals leaves a “huge loophole” for those who would exploit it. He's seen everything from snakes to llamas to rabbits being claimed as emotional support animals worthy of full public access. “There needs to be better clarification and definition, legally, about what's allowable and what's not. There are people who are really exploiting it to take pets where pets aren't supposed to be.”

Edmondson says psychiatric service dogs may be appropriate in some cases, but her worry is that manifestations of certain mental illnesses might endanger dogs. One organization placed a dog with a woman whose obsessive-compulsive disorder caused her to brush its coat so often that its skin became raw. “It is a disability, but the dog should never be victimized.”

Ed Eames of Fresno, California, is president of the Sterling Heights, Michigan-based nonprofit International Association of Assistance Dog Partners, a coalition of some 2,000 guide, hearing and service dog partners. Eames says psychiatric service dogs, like other assistance dogs, must have exemplary public behavior and be trained to perform disability-mitigating tasks. On its website, IAADP lists dozens of psychiatric service tasks, including getting a neighbor on command, bringing medication and preventing panic by being a buffer against physical contact in crowds.

Eames stresses the difference between a bona fide psychiatric service dog and the more nebulous *emotional support animal*, stressing that service dogs have mastered specific assistance tasks. “Emotional support animals are not service animals,” he says. “If the mere presence of the dog makes a person feel better, and that is its single major function, then that is not an assistance dog. Otherwise, any pet owned by any person with a mental disability would then qualify.”

Eames says taking an untrained pet in public for emotional support can stress the animal, and any bad behavior it exhibits could cast a negative light on assistance animals and lead to a backlash of limited access for all.

However, disability attorney Adam Brown of Santa Rosa, California—whose wife has a service dog due to a physical disability—argues that animals whose purpose is to provide emotional support pose no threat to access rights and are “perfectly legal.”

Jana Edmondson, Executive Director of Canine Co-Pilots, with service dog in training Abel

"If a Chihuahua in a basket is helping to mitigate depression, what's the big deal?" asks Brown, legal director for Santa Rosa's Community Resources for Independence and professor of disability laws and practices at Empire Law School. "These are medical determinations. Essentially, you have a doctor identifying a person with a disability, and identifying the animal as servicing that person by performing a task—even if the task it performs is wagging its tail."

Animals for individuals with mental illnesses are held to the same public behavioral standards as any other assistance animal. Brown says. Guide, hearing and service dogs are not allowed to be disruptive or aggressive. "It's the same standard for a little poofy poodle."

Brown predicts the debate will continue until the Department of Justice takes a stand on the issue.

Even then, denials of public access rights will likely remain a bone of contention for all members of the assistance-dog community. Eames and his wife have had guide dogs since 1981 and 1967, respectively, and countless times have argued their right to have dogs with them. IAADP receives frequent calls from members reporting that their dogs have been barred from taxis, stores, schools, medical facilities, courthouses, motels, restaurants and elsewhere. The calls come from across the country but are concentrated in the Eastern and Southern states, says Eames.

Wherever an assistance dog team goes, their reception hinges arbitrarily on who's in charge during that moment of arrival, says Eames. A greeter at a discount store might either rush to welcome them or attempt to bar their entrance.

Fortunately, says Eames, most incidents can be resolved by providing some basic information. "When the person says, 'You can't bring that dog in here,' and you educate them, they usually back down."

Pappas says if that doesn't do the trick, the next step is to speak with a manager. "Keep going up the chain. Be polite and diplomatic. The law is on your side. If you run into a wall, call the police—but don't be trigger happy. Don't rush to do that."

Little Eagle avoids such escalation. "We've been denied access to a shuttle and bus and taxi. We've

Joan Esnayra with her in-training service dog, Kenji

been kicked out of a few stores. But you want somehow to deal with that compassionately and educationally." When that approach fails, she and Caroline generally leave.

Nevertheless, there are legal options, according to Brown. "The moment you're told you can't be there with that dog, you have grounds for a complaint. That dog is just a device you're using, and if you're denied access because of that device, then you're being discriminated against because of your disability." Complaints can be filed under Title II of the ADA if a state or local government bars access, while Title III complaints allege a violation by a public accommodation or a commercial facility. Reports of discrimination can either be filed with the Department of Justice or pursued via private lawsuit.

When state, local or any other entity's statutes or regulations regarding assistance animals conflict with the ADA, whichever rule is least restrictive of people with disabilities applies, says Brown. Therefore, the ADA is the minimum standard, and it permits people with disabilities to take their assistance animals virtually anywhere the general public goes. Zoos and sterile operating rooms are among the few exceptions that meet the very stringent legal standard of programs that can be fundamentally altered by an assistance animal's presence. Little else meets that difficult standard, he says. "No store has gone out of business because of a few dog hairs on a rack of clothes. No restaurant has ever gone under because someone saw a service dog under a table. Most people don't even notice there's a service dog in the room, let alone start running in the opposite direction."

Brown says handlers may legally be asked, "Is that a service dog?" and, "Is that your service dog?" They are not required to



divulge their disability, produce any documentation or dress their dog in a vest or cape.

The law, however, does not require that handlers be treated politely, says Brown. "There is no legal requirement that people be nice or thoughtful or not make bizarre comments. That's just people being rude." Neither does the law prevent businesses from ejecting dogs for misbehavior, like barking during a movie or chewing on a table leg. Dog owners must also pay for any damages, including those that are inadvertent, such as a tail's sweeping glassware off a shelf, Brown says.

Fames is dismayed there are still access problems, given that service and hearing dogs have been around since the 1970s and guide dogs since 1929. Still, he has seen some improvements over the years. For example, cruise lines that were once less than welcoming of the assistance-dog community, he says, now compete with one another for its business.

Charlotte Selenski of Fort Collins, Colorado, says she rarely faces access problems, and she's had her CCI-trained hearing dog, Raive, since 2003. She has, however, dealt with what Pappas calls "the clueless public."

"For some reason, everyone wants to pet my dog," Selenski says. "Most do ask first, and I tactfully explain about working dogs and distraction. But I thank them for asking first. I do believe people are attracted to the vest and just want to touch a working dog."

This appears to be a universal experience among people with assistance dogs. Some, like Little Eagle, don't mind. Others have dogs that become distracted or lose composure when petted. Mesa, who is not quite two, has a tendency to taste those who pet her, which is not always welcomed. I was also pulled off balance once when a man suddenly grabbed her ears for an uninvited scratch.

Consider this scenario, says Pappas. Increasingly, service dogs help parents supervise autistic children who may, at any given moment, act on a dangerous impulse, such as bolting toward a road. One distraction from a random stranger, and even the most diligent dog might lose track of its charge. The consequences could be tragic.

I have personally developed, from experience, the following rules of etiquette:

- 1) Do not speak to a working dog or seek its attention by whistling, waving, snapping your fingers, stepping into its path or drawing inappropriately close.
- 2) Always ask before petting, but wait for the answer and don't whine, beg, demand an explanation or be offended if it's "no."
- 3) Do not ask for a demonstration of *tricks*, drop an item for retrieval or give the dog any command.
- 4) Be understanding if the handler prefers not to chat; she is peppered with questions wherever she goes and may be tired, in a hurry or conversing with someone else.
- 5) Take care not to bump the dog—or run over its tail—with your shopping cart.
- 6) Having an assistance dog does not obligate anyone to divulge confidential medical information, and it's obnoxious to inquire.
- 7) If a handler looks healthy, do not ask, "Are you a trainer?" or "What's wrong with you?"

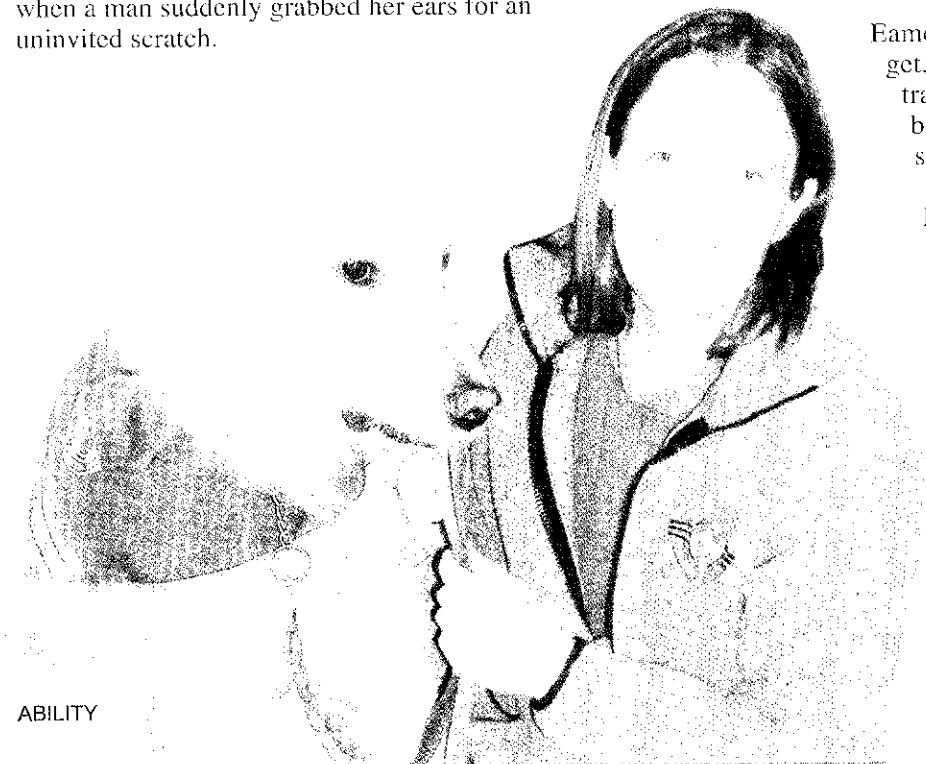
Remember, the assistance-dog community abounds in stories about the clueless public. Follow these simple rules, and you won't become part of our repertoire.

Fames says, "I'm as blind as you can get, and I still get asked, 'Is that dog in training?' I also get asked, 'Is that a blind dog?' That's a classic. I always say, 'I sure hope not!'"

Edmondson says she warns clients that their dogs will attract a lot of attention. "Some of it will be great and wonderful, but some will be difficult and annoying. I tell them, 'Be yourself; handle it in a way that feels natural to you. It's your life.'"

Selenski, who lost her hearing 18 years ago to an autoimmune disease of the cochlea, believes the trade-off is definitely worth it. She says that six-year-old

Diane Little Eagle and her service dog Caroline



Raive has given her back her life. The purebred golden, who never tires of playing fetch, excitedly alerts the former college instructor to noises like the alarm clock and doorbell by nudging her or tugging on the leash. Having *Raivey Gravy* on duty enables Selenski to relax and not be constantly on guard. "I don't have a knot in my stomach anymore."

Raive also announces Selenski's otherwise invisible disability to others. "There is a definite difference in how people perceived my hearing loss when I did not have Raive as a team with me. They became very impatient and didn't make an effort for me to hear them better. I truthfully don't believe they realized how serious my hearing loss is. Even after repeated requests to rephrase the sentence or word, I used to get what I felt was a strange reaction, or an impression that the person did not think I was making an effort to hear them—as if I was aloof or uninterested. With Raive and her vest, there is a 100 percent improvement in how folks make an effort. My confidence has returned, and I am no longer afraid of new people and new circumstances."

No one is sure how many dogs like Raive, Caroline and Mesa are currently at work in the United States. Estimates of assistance-dog teams vary widely, from a few thousand to perhaps 25,000. The numbers are difficult to pinpoint because many train their own dogs or hire professional trainers not affiliated with assistance-dog organizations. There is no national registry or certification requirement for assistance animals, or for the programs that train them, and therefore no clearinghouse that keeps track of either.

Some argue federal certification would make public-access prerequisites and training rules uniform, but the industry appears to be moving toward standardization on its own. Assistance Dogs International is a coalition of not-for-profit organizations that train and place assistance dogs. Its 110 members, of which 27 are fully accredited by ADI, have agreed to uphold a code of standards and ethics. Accreditation will be mandatory for membership within a few years.

Pappas says the industry is also becoming more collaborative, sharing training methods and referring applicants to one another. True, say others, but competition for funding remains fierce, and a handful of organizations thrive while mom-and-pop operations scramble for every scrap. It takes roughly two years and \$15,000 to \$20,000 to produce a fully-trained assistance dog, but clients are generally charged \$0 to \$5,000. Donations, grants, scholarships and endowments help bridge the gap but are a limited well from which to draw.

Historically, women with quadriplegia have represented the largest segment of service-dog ownership, says Edmondson. But now, more men, children with autism and people with autoimmune diseases like multiple sclerosis are joining their ranks. Eames says a variety of other animals are also being used for assistance work these days, including miniature horses and monkeys.

Selenski's dog suits her just fine. She relishes her memories of the two-week *team training* in Santa Rosa, where she was paired with a series of hearing dogs before being officially matched.



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"I can remember the highlight and excitement of being matched up with Raive, and the first night I was able to take her back to my dorm room," says Selenski. She recalls kissing Raive's head so much that lipstick accumulated on the dog's golden fur. "I felt like a child on Christmas morning." ■

by Linda Boone Hunt

Linda Boone Hunt lives in Northern Arizona with her husband Bob and service dog Mesa. Her son Brian and sundry other relatives—including the irrepressible Mackenzie—live nearby. She can be reached at boonehunt@commspeed.net

Canine Co-Pilots
www.caninecopilots.org
877.596.6366

Psychiatric Service Dog Society
www.psychdog.org
571.216.1589

Canine Companions for Independence
www.cci.org
800.572.BARK (2275)

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners
www.iaadp.org
586.826.3938



Linda Boone Hunt and Mesa

Yael, a two-year-old yellow lab, has just begun to fulfill his mission in life. He has been groomed since before birth to become a service dog. My husband Alan and I got to play a part in Yael's journey when we volunteered to become his foster parents.

For one-and-a-half years we raised him, trained him, socialized him and, of course, loved him. As hard as it is for me to admit—as I am by no means a natural animal lover—he became our baby. Unlike a child, however, he came with a manual of instructions, which adorned the table in our den for the 19 months that Yael was with us. Unlike the typical *coffee-table book*—which sits there looking pretty as it waits for someone to turn its pages in admiration—this compendium of rules had its pages read and reread as we learned the new language of dog training.

Alan and I discovered and played out our totally different parenting styles. Like a child, Yael quickly learned with whom he could get away with what. Although he was not allowed to jump (according to the rules), when Alan came through the door, Yael was right there displaying his most primal acts of excitement—jumping and playfully attacking with loads of good slobber and love. Of course, Alan ate it up. In contrast, when I walked in the door, Yael stood

attentively looking up at me as I petted him using the praise the book dictated: "Good stay."

Before long, both of us had softened, and the dog wound up in bed with us every morning, right in between us. I loved how soft and cuddly he was—his bottom half became my morning pillow.

Wherever we went, Yael's yellow cape and appearance in public places that were otherwise off-limits to dogs piqued people's interest. From the beginning, our friends and neighbors were incredulous at our decision to raise him. "You guys are nuts! How could you take an adorable dog like this knowing you have to give him back?" We gave the standard response outlining our dedication to the greater cause, but the explanation generally fell on skeptical ears: "Wait till the time comes—you will hope he fails so you can keep him." Having no prior experience as pet owners, at first we couldn't fathom a connection to an animal strong enough to engender fantasies of kidnapping, as had been half-jokingly suggested by our friends. All we saw and felt was the work his care entailed—we were not too concerned about the return policy.

My hope in taking on Yael's training as a project was for him to *pass* and be placed as a service dog/companion to

someone with a disability. That is, after all, how I got involved with the service animal community to begin with. Having a daughter with disabilities, I initially thought such a dog might be a good idea for her. But after reading about service animals, I wasn't sure in her case if an assistance dog would be a good idea. If the dog learned to retrieve things for her, to open doors and turn on lights, would this assistance promote laziness and enable her to become even more of a couch potato? Would a service dog be counterproductive to our years of hard work in fostering her independence?

But I still wanted to be involved in helping other people with disabilities get service animals. In reading about the agency Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), I learned we could be puppy raisers. To be a part of raising a dog who might go on to help a person with a disability felt like a very meaningful endeavor. Admittedly, it also tapped into an unfulfilled childhood desire—as a child, my pleas to my mother for a dog had always been answered with, “When you move into your own house you can have a dog.” Now that I had, I wanted to finally give it a try. (Ironically, the first and only shoe Yael ever chewed, at two-and-a-half months of age, was my mother's.)

We grew to enjoy and love Yael, but with our very busy schedules, we soon worried that we could not put in all the time needed to properly train him. We fell short of our goal to practice the necessary commands on a daily basis, and my hope for his passing started to fade. Indeed, at our introduction into the program we had been told that more than half of the dogs enrolled do not ultimately get accepted as service animals due to physical, temperament or personality flaws.

When the time came to return Yael to the agency, it was naturally very difficult, as predicted by all who knew of our endeavor. We watched as he was led away toward his new crate with his new roommate. He was beautifully slim and sleek, as we had followed the rules of his diet perfectly so that he was just the right weight. He stood outside the crate looking back at us. Did he know this was good-bye? Alan's tears spoke for us all.

As the weeks passed without our receiving a phone call, we adopted a *no-news-is-good-news* mentality,

assuming the silence meant he was still in the program. I started becoming hopeful, surprised at his success. I really hadn't thought he would make it, although Alan had always believed he had a good chance because of his wonderful nature.

Over the next few months, we received positive report cards and had several phone conferences about Yael's progress, all very favorable. Our boy was doing well. I started envisioning graduation day, walking him down the aisle and up onto the stage, handing him over to his new family. But I still had to rein myself in from this rush of good feelings, knowing that until the moment he was actually matched with a family, he could fail and be released for any number of reasons. Even a flaw as mild as fearfulness in a new environment—such as hesitation when walking on a new grating in the sidewalk—would be enough to release him.

Five months after we returned Yael, his graduation announcement arrived in the mail. Our mission was accomplished and he was about to embark on his new path. I felt like a parent whose child had just been accepted to Harvard. We were going to see him again, one last time, to officially hand him over to his new partner—an 11-year-old boy from Pennsylvania who had cerebral palsy. Yael was to begin a new life, making a difference for this child as a helper and friend. Could there have been any mission greater for him—or for us? ■

by Harriet Gold Cabelly, LCSW



Nava working with Yael, in training



Alan and Harriet bringing home Yael, at 8 weeks old