Support Dogs, Inc.

Support Dogs, Inc. provides service dogs, at no charge, that make a daily difference by offering a life of independence and productivity instead of one of confinement and isolation. To most people, a dog is a pet, but to people with chronic diseases, such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, MS, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, or accident victims, a dog can be a lifesaver. They are trained to assist with mobility tasks - open doors, answer phones, pull wheelchairs, retrieve small and distant objects as small as a dime, carry bags, rise to counters, help with undressing, standing, and bracing, provide stability in walking, and offer emotional and physical support.

WCMSC's Beth Gerber and Support Dog, Rex -

Having MS and being a fulltime financial Having MS and being a full-time financial specialist for the USDA-RD, I realized that I was going to need some extra help. That's when I was introduced to Nadine Wenig, a trainer for Support Dogs, Inc. (SDI). We started out training my Border Collie/Australian Sheppard mix named Ally to help me to pick up things off the floor, since bending over often made me fall. Ally did an awesome



job – even becoming certified, which allowed her to go to work with me. She would do everything for me at home - no problem. But at work, she was very skittish and I was scared of stressing her out so much that it could shorten her life. But the three of us kept trying, until one day Nadine, who has been training dogs for over 20 years, told me that Ally had really quit on us. So, now she is a playmate and best friend to my new support dog, Rex.

I remember the day I took Rex home, thinking to myself that I did not really need him now that my MS wasn't bothering me much. So, I decided to give him back to SDI, hoping he could go to someone who needed him more than me. But, Nadine kept telling me over and over again, "You do need him - use him!" Soon after, I had a hysterectomy and wasn't able to work with him, as correcting him could cause physical problems for me during recovery. For those 6 weeks, I felt that I had ruined him. Once recovered, we did get back to work and he was doing a great job. Unfortunately, I had a bad relapse with the MS and working with him was impossible again for another 4 weeks.

By then, I was having a very hard time standing and walking. So, I began using an electric scooter and/or a walker. One beautiful October day, Rex, Ally, our other dog, Lucy, and I went outside to play ball. The dog that I claimed "I did not need" took me by surprise. We

were all having fun, as I threw the ball while sitting on my walker that was locked. My 9-year-old daughter was due home soon from school and my husband was at work. (Keep in mind that Rex was in play mode and not wearing a harness that would tell him he was working.) One of the girls dropped the ball at my feet and while I was bending over (still seated on my walker) to get the ball, my walker shot out from under me and sent me down to the concrete head first.

It took only two seconds for all of the dogs to take advantage of the opportunity to lick my face! I just laid there for a moment, scared that I was not going to be able to get up. Not wanting to alarm my daughter, I was not able to roll over or sit up. Then I got really scared but maintained my composure to find that nothing actually hurt. It was just the MS holding me down like it usually does when I fall. At that point, I told Ally and Lucy to stop licking me, but Rex stopped, as well. He just stood over my body and looked at me - all the while, the girls went back to playing ball. While I was giving Rex a big hug it came to me, he can get me up! " I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck and told him to pull - but when nothing happened, I realized I had said the wrong command. I then told him back AND HE DID! It took three backs for him to get me sitting upright. I then made him brace and I grabbed him from every angle I could, as he just stood there like a statue until I was standing and holding on to my walker again.

We all went back inside and I sat down in my recliner, rethinking of what had just happened. I hugged Rex with all the love I had inside me and he got a great massage. "I did need him - THANK YOU, NADINE AND SDI." For Rex to know that he was there to help me, when he could have been playing, was absolutely amazing!

WCMSC's Robyn Hulsey and TOUCH Dog, Jazzy –

TOUCH (Therapy of Unique Canine Helpers) is a St. Louis-based support dog program that trains volunteers to bring their dogs to visit those in hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care facilities. The TOUCH Program has certified over 1000 volunteer teams and visits over



30,000 patients and residents annually.

Robyn Hulsey, with the help of her 5-year-old shih tzu, Jazzy, provides therapy to patients in SSM St. Joseph Health Center in St. Charles. Every other Friday, Hulsey pushes Jazzy in a dog stroller through the hospital's stroke rehabilitation center, stopping at patients' beds and wheelchairs to let them pet and scratch Jazzy, who responds by licking them.

The WalkAide

Recent advances in diagnostic imaging (fMRI, PET Scans) and accelerated, neuroscientific evidence are challenging previously accepted "patient recovery plateaus". As a result, orthopedic clinicians are able to prolong and even accelerate recovery by providing specific repetitive signals for the body to analyze and process. Combining this evidence with advances in technology (making products smaller, more reliable and affordable) into individual patient care plans have led to innovative solutions for patients challenged with mobility.



One device that is restoring mobility and patients' independence is *The WalkAide System*. It is a lightweight, one-piece device worn just below the knee, designed to feel like a part of the body. It uses electrical stimulation to

combat a form of lower leg paralysis known as "foot drop" due to multiple sclerosis, stroke, spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, and traumatic brain injury.

The WalkAide applies low-level electrical currents directly to the peroneal nerves (i.e. the motor nerve that controls the movement of the ankle and foot) and instruct the muscles to flex the foot at the appropriate time in the gait cycle. It uses Bluetooth technology to communicate during programming and an embedded accelerometer to determine where the leg is in space. The accelerometer is the same type of technology used in the Wii gaming systems.

For patients challenged with mobility, this means improved stability. The *WalkAide* also assists and strengthens weak muscles, helping patients walk further with more energy. It can also reduce swelling and increase circulation, all of which allow patients to get back to the activities they enjoy.

A study published in the September 2006 issue of the peer-reviewed journal Neurorehabilitation and Neural Repair reports the walking speed of patients (not specified what type of patients) wearing the *WalkAide* increased by 15% after three months, 32% after six months, and by nearly 50% after twelve months. The study also showed the number of steps taken per day by *WalkAide* users increased significantly over the year.

We have found the WalkAide to be very effective in some MS patients seen at WCMSC, unfortunately our experience is that insurance does not cover this device often.

For more information on the *WalkAide*, visit www.walkaide.com or contact Ed Blok at Hanger Prosthetics and Orthotics: 314-567-6844 or eblok@hanger.com.

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"Just petting a dog lowers your blood pressure," Hulsey said. "We sit and listen while they visit. They might talk about the dog they have at home, or whatever is on their mind."

Bobbie Appelbaum, community outreach manager for the NMSS's Gateway Area chapter, said Hulsey is one of her most dedicated volunteers and is "always making people feel welcome and good about themselves." And, so does Jazzy!

The Service Dog Program consists of:

- Puppy Raising Labrador and Golden Retrievers (between 9 and 12 weeks old) are easily trained because of their willingness to please and retrieve. They are screened to ensure they have the appropriate physical and behavioral qualities to be a working dog. Once in the program, the puppy is placed in a volunteer puppy raising home or in the PAWS Prison Program for 14-18 months.
- 2. Canine College At 18 months of age, the dogs return to Support Dogs, Inc. to begin professional training with a staff member for three to six months. The dog's career is then chosen based on its skills and work drive. They can become a street-certified dog that accompanies their person in all situations, including public access, a home-certified dog that works only in the home, or a companion dog used primarily for companionship.
- 3. Team Training Once the dog is ready to be placed, the potential recipient comes to St. Louis for a two-week training session. During this time, the person and dog are trained how to work with each other. There are many in-house and public training sessions conducted to ensure that the new team works well together. Once training is complete and certification is obtained, the dog and owner go home to begin their new life together as a service team. Support Dogs, Inc. provides follow-up to ensure the new service team is working well together. If problems do arise, arrangements are made for refresher training sessions to ensure that the service team has a productive and enriched life. (Support Dogs, Inc. asks for is a \$100 application fee.)

Applying for a Service Dog through Support Dogs, Inc.

For more information, please contact: Support Dogs, Inc. at 314-997-2325 and ask for Bill Dahlkamp, Executive Director or email him at bdahlkamp@ supportdogs.org. Applications are available on-line at. www.supportdogs.org.