

Working Class Dogs

Assistance Dogs: helping hounds and canine carers

I imagine that most people, when hearing the term 'Assistance Dogs', think of the Guide Dogs that help the blind or Hearing Dogs that assist the deaf. But there's a special breed of assistance dogs that help people with physical disabilities. These 'wonder dogs' are trained to do the tasks that most able-bodied people take for granted; picking up dropped items, opening doors, lifting immobilised limbs and daily chores such as doing the laundry. They perform incredible tasks and give independence back to the recipient.

Peter Bennett is President and Founder of Australian Support Dogs (ASDOG) and set up the charity back in 1997. He was left a quadriplegic after a racing car accident. Originally, Peter trained his German Shepherd, Catja to assist him. After considerable success with Catja's training, and inspired by his experience, he wanted others to benefit from an assistance dog. ASDOG continues to be run by a small, dedicated team of people with disabilities.

Initial training assistance was provided through the Texas Hearing and Service Dogs, based in Dallas in the US. As Peter explains "It was one of my trips to America and I rang around all the service dog trainers within the US. This was the only organisation prepared to help me get the training set up. I guess all the others thought that Australia was just too far away. THASD were so good, they offered for us to send someone over there to give instruction to train these dogs. We were able to send our first trainer over there, where they received instruction for a number of weeks."

Golden Retrievers or Labradors are generally chosen for the program due to their temperament, as they're very friendly and adaptable. Peter's choice for a German Shepherd was one brought by his familiarity with the breed but as he also explains "I've been in situations around Sydney where I wouldn't have felt particularly safe with a Labrador. For instance there've been many times where I've left a meeting late around places like Darlinghurst. People with disabilities are often are a soft target for muggings. My dog gives me mobility and visibility."

Suitable puppies are sourced and placed in a 'puppy raiser' home at about eight weeks of age. As a puppy raiser, ASDOG require that the puppies attend fortnightly training classes. As Peter explains "The puppies are taught basic skills of obedience—everything from sit, drop, come, stay—those sorts of things. We start training the basics from a really young age. A big part of the training is encouraging the puppies to pick things up - shoes, towels, anything really."



Emma with her Assistance Dog Molly

Raisers also need to take the puppies out to a variety of public places such as shopping centres, public transport and schools—anywhere they can be exposed to a number of noises and environments. ASDOG also require that the puppy not be left alone for more than four hours at a time or left out in a backyard. The puppies need to be appropriately socialised and included in daily domestic activities.

As a puppy raiser there is no fee paid, but ASDOG cover all expenses like veterinary bills, food and they supply the beds, treats, toys and food bowls. Every cost in raising a puppy is met by ASDOG. So the puppy raisers don't have to make a monetary investment - just their guidance, patience, training time, love and care in those crucial months.

Diana Cooper is the Director of Training for ASDOG and after 12-15 months of age the potential assistance dog goes to live with her for around six months of intensive training. It's at this time that Diana is able to assess skills a dog needs for a potential recipient. "Each recipient has individual needs and so each dog is taught specific tasks. For instance one of our recipients has MS (Multiple Sclerosis) and going up stairs is incredibly difficult for her. We were able to teach her dog, Molly, how to get her muzzle under each foot so that Emma can be helped up each stair." One of the hardest things for an assistance dog to learn is the concept of getting something big, like a towel or blanket, into something small, like a basket.

Diana trains the dogs by positive reinforcement, operant conditioning techniques. These rely on rewarding of positive behaviours not punishment of negative performance. All dogs must complete and pass a Public Access Test before they can be certified as an assistance dog. The dog must demonstrate that he/she is safe to be in public and that the recipient must be in control of the dog at all times. There are a number of situations that the dog encounters through this test and must not be distracted by food, noises other dogs and people.

Diana explains that a big problem for assistance dogs is the general public not understanding that the dogs are working and therefore shouldn't be approached. "We ask that people don't rush up and try to pat the dog as this causes a distraction. Instead, engage the person not the dog."

Despite having a certified assistance dog, Peter's encountered many hurdles in taking dogs into public areas. "Twelve years ago I had huge problems taking Catja out into shopping malls and on public transport. Mostly I got stopped more times than not. It has got better but I still get reports from some of our ASDOG recipients who get stopped going into service stations or using ATMs. They're situations where you'll get some over-exuberant manager believing that only Guide Dogs can come into their establishment. I spend a great deal of my time solving these sorts of problems with phone calls to shopping centre managers to let them know about what access into public areas an assistance dog is allowed."

"We've had to do a huge amount of re-education - it doesn't come from malice, just general ignorance. Sometime it's security personnel or management within shopping centres and on public transport who don't understand that these dogs are allowed anywhere a person is permitted to go. I've even had it recently where in a restaurant I was restrained from dining because of 'health regulations'. But you've got to be persistent in a polite and gentle way and we have to point out the rights of the Disability Discrimination Act. We just keep plugging away at these attitudes and over twelve years it has got easier. I just hope that in another ten years it will be a lot easier."

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Wash day: Cassie helping Lisa

Sadly, at 13 years, Catja is now 'retired' from assisting Peter. He's busy training his current dog Jed, also a German Shepherd. Catja has given Peter many years of faithful service and she's now at a period of her life where her mobility is severely impaired and so it's Peter who is assisting her.

In the time they've been together, Peter estimates she's accompanied him on at least 14 overseas trips, mainly to the US and numerous flights within Australia. A seat next to the owner is allocated, although the dogs occupy the space on the floor. I can imagine that for a total of 17 hours travel time, not being able to go to the toilet must be hard for the dog. Peter laughs at this and remembers a time where an enthusiastic flight attendant asked him how Catja was going to go to the toilet. "I explained that I could not possibly fit Catja and my wheelchair into the small airline toilet cubicle. If the attendant could possibly accompany her, she would then do her business over the pan and he could flush this for her." This suggestion was met with an enthusiastic reply that yes, he would be more than happy to assist. "We both had a laugh as I explained that Catja was trained to hold on for long periods of time and this extra in-flight courtesy wouldn't be needed."

The strong bond these special dogs have with their owners is evident in a situation Peter had not long after getting Catja. "I was going out to see live theatre in the city and was taking this woman on a romantic date. I wasn't going to take Catja with me, so left her at home. When I arrived back home several hours later, Catja was waiting for me at the front gate. She was just standing there waiting. At first I thought she must have got out by leaping from the upstairs balcony. This really worried me, as I was concerned that she would have injured herself. Anyway it turns out that she had watched me enough times opening the front door and she had taught herself how to do this. The separation anxiety was so strong and she was bonded to me. I guess she figured since we had been together 24/7 that me leaving her was wrong and she had to find me."

Rebecca from Randwick has assistance dog, Jessie, a 3-year old German Shepherd. Twenty one years ago Rebecca was just an average 14 year old, having fun and enjoying the surf at Bondi Beach. A freak accident left her an 'incomplete quadriplegic'. Jessie has revolutionised Rebecca's life by providing her with independence. This includes many little things like picking up and dislodging things from drawers, fetching items and helping her with shopping. Jessie is also trained to assist Rebecca with ATMs as Rebecca has difficulty in removing her card. On command, Jessie reaches for the card, retrieves it in her mouth and returns it to Rebecca. Jessie is able to do things faultlessly that Rebecca would otherwise have to call on family members to do for her. 'Blessed' is a word that Rebecca uses often when describing her life with Jessie. "I only wish I had a dog like this years ago."

Assistance dogs change lives in so many ways—not just helping with mobility and independence but also engaging the general public. Too often we're conditioned to look straight through a person with a disability and these dogs can be an interface. As Rebecca says, "With Jessie by my side, people come over to talk to me. They ask all sorts of questions about Jessie rather than asking about my disability. Sometimes shopping can take a little longer but it's worth it as I meet a diverse range of people."

Rebecca also points out that Jessie gets plenty of opportunity to be a dog with play-time and exercise. "We'll get to the park and I'll let Jessie off and she's just so happy running and playing with other dogs. I've also taught her some fun tricks like pointing a pretend gun at her and going bang. She'll drop to the floor and act dead. Her favourite trick currently is to take a bow."

The cost for a disabled person is just a \$25.00 initial application fee: the dog is supplied free of charge. All ASDOG asks is that the recipient covers the veterinary fees, feeding and general care of the dog for the rest of its life. "We estimate the cost to be around about \$15,000 in training one dog and readying it for a recipient." Peter stresses that a lot of the staff is voluntary. "As a charity, doing what we do, the public liability insurance costs are just huge. It's the biggest cost for us in training these dogs. It would be great if we could get more funding as we run on a tight budget, pouring all possible resources into the training of these dogs."

How you can help:

- donations can be made to ASDOG - however small
- becoming member of ASDOG is just \$25.00 per annum and you'll receive their newsletter
- apply to be a puppy raiser
- regularly check into their web site to keep up-to-date with fundraising activities

ASDOG
PO Box 644
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Footnote: Catja passed away peacefully after Christmas. She was an inspirational and faithful companion and will be missed.

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