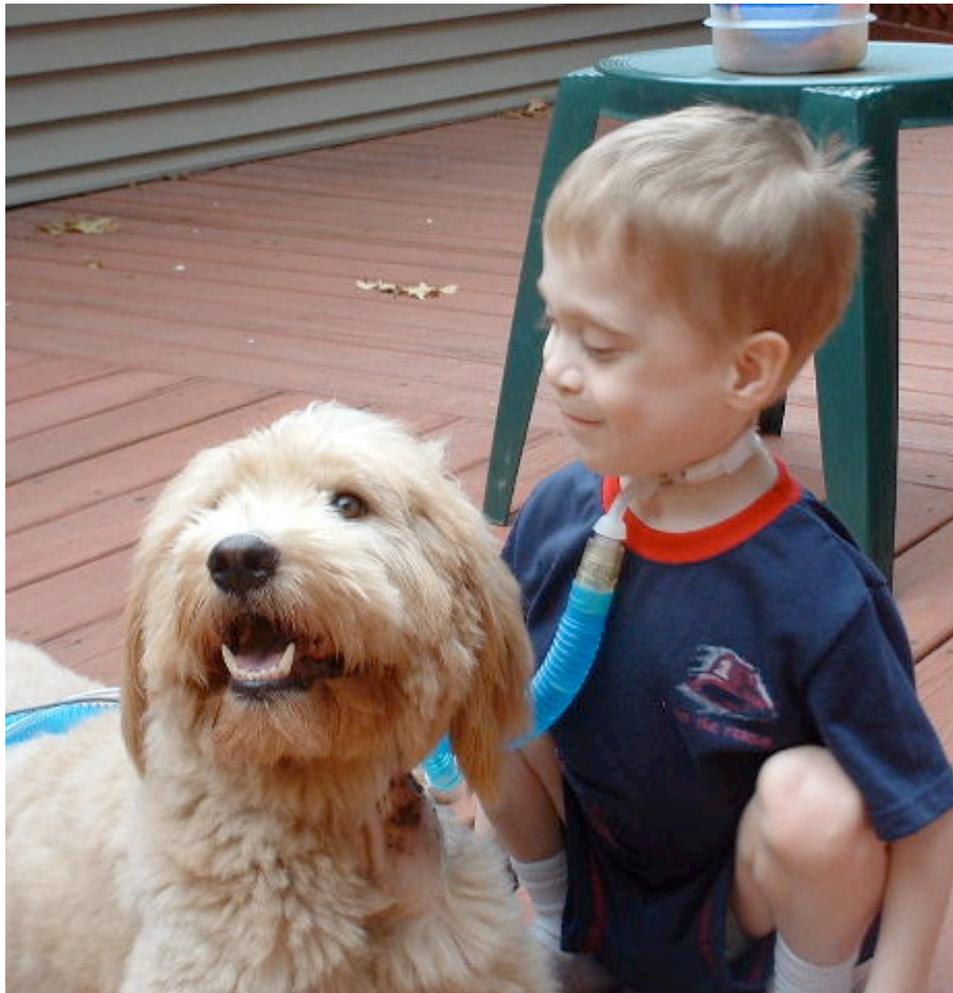




Complex Child E-Magazine

www.ComplexChild.com

From Fear to Freedom: One Very Special Service Dog by Deborah Tiel Millard



Casey and Connor enjoying a beautiful day

I grabbed all of Connor's gear, chewy tube, headphones, baseball hat, squeeze ball and sunglasses, and took him out on the back deck. Such a completely perfect day! Sun shining...cloudless skies...crisp cool air... It was an absolutely perfect spring day with my beautiful son. How much better could it get?

Within seconds of arriving outside, and just as the sun began to warm my face, the perfect day was shattered by the sound of my son's screams. Connor was shrieking and trembling, because a truck drove by. One hand was tightly covering his ear, while the other frantically motioned me to go back inside. My heart sank as I quickly picked him up and carried him to the safety of his indoor refuge. As I was rocking and comforting him, I kept thinking, "Why had I thought it would be so different this time? Was it because the day had been so perfect? Like somehow if there were no clouds in the sky, nothing could go wrong? How could I put him in a situation that would terrify him like that?"

It was heart-wrenching to see him completely panic, totally fall apart, over a bird chirping, or a truck passing nearby. How could the wind rustling some leaves, or a puddle shimmering on the deck cause him so much distress? Yet these things that seemed so harmless to me were a complete assault to his senses.

My husband Scott and I felt so hopeless and alone as we struggled to know how to help him. We had tried everything we knew to try. We had followed the advice of the therapists and doctors we respected and trusted, yet the therapies that helped other children helped our son minimally. Connor was doing sensory-based OT, listening therapy, brushing, and many other programs with some success, but he continued to struggle. He just could not cope with the world around him.

Because Connor could not handle being around other children, he was enrolled in a home-based school program. He could not even go to family gatherings on holidays, and he definitely could not cope with family vacations. His anxiety became so severe that Scott and I knew we had to do something more to help him, but what else was there to try? We had gone down every avenue we knew.

Well-meaning friends told us to "just keep taking him out, he'll get used to it!" But they didn't understand Connor. He didn't get used to it! Every time he went anywhere, things got worse for him, and he would take days or even longer to recover. He got more and more withdrawn, fearful and terrified. We felt incredibly isolated and were losing hope.

Amazingly, we found hope, when we least expected it, through an agency that trains service dogs for children with all kinds of disabilities, 4 Paws for Ability. As we did research, we learned that 4 Paws for Ability spends approximately one year training each dog, and then matches the dog with each child based on the following things: a detailed application process, a phone interview with the director, a video tape made by the family, and if possible, a face-to-face meeting. As a non-profit organization, 4 Paws for Ability does not charge families for the dogs, but instead families participate in the process by fundraising for the organization the same amount it costs to care for and train their dog.

The possibility of a new four-pawed friend to help Connor was really exciting and at the same time pretty overwhelming. After all, what if we asked all of our friends and family to give money for this dog, and then things didn't work out? After much prayer and deliberation, we decided to take the plunge into fundraising for a service dog. God has

blessed us with an amazingly supportive church, and wonderful friends and family. Although it takes the typical family three to nine months to complete the fundraising process, incredibly, within a month we had more than enough money raised!

A few months later we were attending a ten-day training class in Xenia, Ohio with six other families, and Connor's new service dog, Casey. Everyone at 4 Paws for Ability was genuinely caring and sensitive to our needs. We were blown away by the love and concern they had for our son.



Casey is a beautiful dog and is great at all the basic obedience skills. She is well-behaved in public and also trained to do specific things to help Connor. When he is tired or overwhelmed by his environment, Casey is trained to give him sensory input by lying in his lap. If he gets upset or frustrated, she can distract him by putting her paw on his chest or lap. When Connor just needs a friend, Casey gives him a “high five” or plays ball with him.

What has been happening between Connor and Casey is truly a miracle! Casey accepts Connor for who he is. She loves him and is completely devoted to him. Casey is a friend to Connor without condition. The bond between Connor and Casey was not immediate, and has taken time to develop just like any relationship, but we were delighted to see that right from the beginning Connor was never afraid of Casey and always enjoyed her

company. It is wonderful to see their bond continue to strengthen and develop into an intimate friendship.

A couple of weeks ago we grabbed Connor's gear and took him and Casey out on the back deck. Another completely perfect day! Sun shining...cloudless skies...crisp cool air... It was an absolutely perfect fall day with our beautiful son and his dog. How much better could it get? Connor sat on the steps of our deck, as the wind rustled the leaves and the birds chirped, and threw a ball to Casey. He looked at me and smiled. Tears came to my eyes as I watched my little boy interact with his dog. I watched as he picked up leaves and acorns, looked at them in wonder, and then placed them in my hands.

Casey has enabled my son, at times, to ignore the birds, the trucks, the wind, and sometimes the puddles, too. He is actually beginning to enjoy the outside world! He can now function in a more typical way in spite of what is happening around him. Connor isn't "cured" and he still struggles with his environment and many other things, but his life is so much fuller because of Casey! He is more confident, assertive and proud of himself.



Now our family can actually experience some of those sunny, cloudless, perfect days. Instead of being stuck in Connor's inside refuge, we are out potting plants, playing ball with Casey, or just having fun! Honestly, I never had any idea that a dog could have

such an impact on my son's life! I am so incredibly thankful for the difference "4 Paws" can make!

Reprinted with permission from S.I. Focus Magazine, Summer 2007 issue. We thank S.I. Focus for allowing us to reprint this article and suggest you visit their website <http://www.sifocus.com/> for more information about their print magazine on Sensory Integration.

Deb Millard lives in Northern NJ with her husband Scott, and Connor's service dog Casey. She has her MA in Early Childhood Education. Deb & Scott's son Connor passed away from Mitochondrial disease and HLH in September 2007, at the age of 8 1/2. He was dearly loved and is deeply missed by everyone. To learn about Connor and his life, please visit <http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/connorscott99>

For more information on 4 Paws for Ability and service dogs, please visit their website at <http://www.4pawsforability.org/> 4 Paws for Ability is unique in that they will provide dogs for children with all types of special needs and disabilities.

For a list of other organizations that provide service dogs, please visit <http://www.assistancedogunitedcampaign.org/programlist.html>