



Cover Story

People
with MS
Are...

Going to the Dogs

BY JODI RYAN AND ANNE-ELIZABETH STRAUB



Jodi Ryan leaves her home in Arlington, Texas, to do her errands for the day. As the day wears on, she begins to tire. Suddenly, Sky, her Great Dane, who has been with her all day, plants herself in front of Jodi and nudges her toward a chair or toward a wall if no chair is available. Jodi gets the hint and gives herself a rest, thus averting a cascade of symptoms. For Jodi, fatigue shows itself first as unsteadiness but can build to include severe loss of balance, stumbling, and falling. After resting a while, Jodi continues with her day, walking steadily alongside Sky.

Anne-Elizabeth Straub in Brooklyn, New York, gets out of bed and finds she's having difficulty walking today. She calls her dog, Meka, a golden retriever, who "braces" Anne while she gets up, walks next to her, and assists her in and out of the shower. He brings her shoes as she dresses. When they leave the apartment, Meka walks next to her as she drives her motorized wheelchair. If Anne drops the phone, a pen, or something else, Meka picks it up.

What do these two women have in common?

They both have MS and wonderful service dogs.



Dogs, among others

Service animals come in many shapes, sizes, and species and perform tasks including, but not limited to, retrieval, support, guiding, alerting to sounds, opening and closing doors, and responding to changes in the physiological, mental, or emotional state of their human partners.

Monkeys, horses, cats, and pigs have all been trained to perform helpful tasks. But dogs have a special relationship with people and are, perhaps, the best-known service animals. Guide dogs for the visually impaired have long been accepted by the general public. Other types of assistance dogs, if less familiar, are equally helpful.

The number of people with MS who have service dogs is growing every year. Still, service dogs are not for everyone with a disability, any more than dogs are appropriate companions for everyone in the general population.

Deciding if a service dog is right

Typically, MS makes some daily activities more challenging, but it frequently takes people who have MS some time to decide that they need any kind of help at all. The decision to acquire a service dog takes a period of adjustment, even if the person knows the potential value of an animal's help.

Sometimes the sentiment expressed is: *"I'm not disabled enough to need that,"* or its opposite: *"I'm too disabled to have a dog."* Both responses miss the essential issue.

We think the question might be framed this way: “If you have a disability and using a service dog would mitigate its effects, would your life be easier and better?”

Another question also needs an answer: “Can you care for the needs of your animal partner either directly or with help?”

Answering truthfully requires considering your living arrangement, finances, and the desires and needs of other family members as well as yourself. It also means assessing your planning, problem-solving, and other cognitive abilities; the presence or absence of a support network; and your normal level of energy. When MS is in the picture, these vary in every individual situation regardless of the level of disability. There are no “one size fits all” answers either.

Partnership is a two-way street

The next question is the obvious one: Do you like dogs, and do you and those with whom you live want to live with a dog? If an immaculately clean and fuzz-free home is one of your paramount needs, you might think twice! Dogs shed. Breeds vary in the amount and timing of shedding, but with only a few exceptions, fur is a fact of life. So is some level of “slobber”—again, dependent upon the breed. These factors might influence the choice of breed or the decision to have a dog at all.

The next consideration is the partner-

ship aspect. A service dog can provide wonderful assistance and loyal companionship, but he or she also has needs that must be met. A dog requires food, daily exercise, and care for bodily functions. A dog needs grooming, veterinary care, fun, affection, socialization with other dogs, and ongoing training. These take time, planning, energy, and money. Do you have or can you muster the funds, time, and personnel to meet a dog’s needs?

■ Do you have the ability to exercise your dog and clean up after him or her yourself? Whether you can or not, do you

have a reliable person willing to do this when you can’t—come rain, snow, sleet, hail, summer heat, or an MS flare?

■ Do you have or can you raise funds to pay for regular veterinary care as well as food, accessories, and training aids? If your personal funds are tight, have you researched potential financial resources? (Help may be available.)

■ Do you have the ability to be consistent in working with your dog and using the techniques you will learn? Can you put aside your frustration when a training routine is not going well, and figure out ways to turn it around?

Different paths

If you’ve decided that partnership with a service dog might be for you, how do you go about getting one?

The most common way is to acquire a dog that has been trained by a professional trainer, one who works for either a



What is the legal status of a “service” animal?

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the primary requirement is that the animal be specially trained to mitigate the effects of disability for an individual. The law is silent on who must train the animal. People with disabilities who use service animals have the right to public access; in other words, they may have the animal with them in public places, even if animals are not normally permitted there.

Since the person has this right, it is imperative that the dog be trained well enough not only to do service tasks but to behave well in public even under adverse circumstances. For more information on the ADA and service animals, go to: www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/svcanimb.htm.

reputable profit or not-for-profit organization. There is also a significant number of owner/trainers. No one path is right for everyone!

The path of owner/trainer

If you are considering being an owner/trainer, there's a great deal to learn. Many owner/trainers as well as professional trainers point out that selecting the dog can be far more daunting than the training itself. There must be a fit between the dog's characteristics (physical and temperamental) and the needs of the person with the disability.

The dog must be in good health and condition. That might seem like a no-brainer until you look a bit deeper. Suppose, for example, you want the dog to assist with your balance. It is particularly important that the animal's hips and elbows be healthy and free of any dyspla-

sia or arthritis. Larger dogs, those most likely to be chosen for this kind of task, are more prone to congenital dysplasia than smaller breeds.

The only way to be sure is to X-ray the animal when she or he is full grown (around two years). The films should be interpreted by a vet who is a specialist in such X-rays. However, obedience training often begins when a dog is a puppy, and service dog training typically begins when a dog is nine to 18 months old. There is the possibility of disappointment—if balance support is essential.

There are also personality or temperament traits that are important to the chemistry between a dog and a human partner. Dogs are highly individual in terms of their willingness and ability to learn and their levels of concentration. It could prove to be a lengthy, costly, and emotionally draining process if the first (or second) dog you attempt to train proves not to be **the one**.

The owner/trainer takes on a large though clearly not impossible project. It can be successful, given access to the right information and support. There are many knowledgeable owner/trainers, and the Internet provides a means for these sometimes far flung people to communicate. See box on next page.



PROS

- Complete control of the project
- Knowledge of your own needs/abilities so the animal is trained for tasks specific to you
- Ability to set your own schedule and work within your tolerances (for example, scheduling training work when you have the most

energy and attention)

- Ability to do short training exercises throughout the day
- All training at home or in your real-life environment



CONS

- With control comes complete responsibility
- Need for knowledge of dog training techniques or access to assistance, support, and information
- Limitations in your energy, strength or endurance which will limit training time
- Need for patience to work with the dog continually, without using negative training methods

Private professional trainers

If you choose a private professional trainer, you need to review the trainer's experience. Ask to contact former clients, especially others with MS. Ask if the trainer will help you select your dog. If this service is not included, you need to consider how you will find the best dog for your needs. Who will be in charge of those important health and temperament checks? Are you clear about timing and costs? Do you have a written agreement?



PROS

- Most of the training will take place at or near home
- You can develop a personalized program
- You are in control



CONS

- Higher costs overall
- Need to personally coordinate the project

The path of assistance dog organizations

There are both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations that provide and train service animals and their human companions. Assistance Dogs International is a major resource for locating nonprofit groups. A tour of Web sites—or a look through the brochures—will show you that policies, procedures, expenses, and expectations vary widely.

Make sure that you understand and agree with the policies and procedures of any organization you decide to work with. What will you be required to pay? Will you be the dog's legal owner? Will the organization follow up after placement?

Resources

Assistance Dogs International (www.adi.org) is a coalition of not-for-profit organizations that train and place assistance dogs. Members subscribe to the organization's ethics and standards.

American Dog Trainers Network (www.inch.com/~dogs/training.html) lists service dog trainers by state. A huge site.

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners (www.iaadp.org) provides education to anyone involved with service dogs. Links to user groups and important educational services, including a picture gallery showing assistance animals at work. Does not list trainers.

The Delta Society (www.deltasociety.org) provides some information on assistance dogs but focuses more on pet therapy. (It lists organizations that bring pets for visits to people who cannot have animals where they live.)

How and at what cost?

You will be asked many questions about your needs, preferences, and living conditions. Are you comfortable with that?

 **PROS**

- Many aspects of the project coordinated for you
- Health and temperament checks done before matching you to a dog
- Organization has access to dogs most likely to respond to training
- Experienced trainers available to work with you and your dog

 **CONS**

- Organized program may be less adaptable to individual needs

- Travel and lodging away from home are frequently involved during training
- Training for the human partner may stretch your endurance and attention abilities

So there you have our primer on finding a new partner in life! Of course, it's just the beginning ... ■

Jodi Lee Ryan is a freelance writer and professional speaker. She is currently helping to train Sky's successor, Cinder. Anne-Elizabeth Straub, who partners with Meka, is a certified Feldenkrais practitioner.

American Kennel Club (www.akc.org) provides information on characteristics of various breeds, their temperament, and where to find breeders.

Mailing Lists and Groups

Online groups and mailing lists for all aspects of life with service dogs are numerous. As always, critical thinking and judgment must be in play to evaluate the information and opinions found. Anne and Jodi have found these lists helpful:

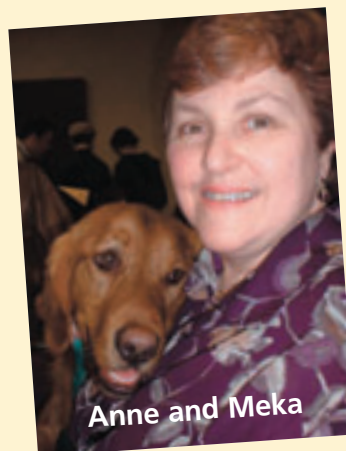
groups.yahoo.com/group/assistance-dogs An e-mail list that deals with "any topic concerning any trained (or in training) assistance/service dog that aids disabled people in some direct way."

groups.yahoo.com/group/OC-Assist-Dogs This list focuses on operant conditioning as a training method. This employs positive reinforcement and avoids scolding or other negative techniques in

order to develop animals that work for joy and rewards rather than from fear of punishment.

www.clickertraining.com/home/index.htm

Karen Pryor Home Page—an invaluable site for owner/trainers who want to use operant conditioning techniques, described above.



groups.yahoo.com/group/ot-adogs

Primarily devoted to owner/trainers.

groups.yahoo.com/group/walking_cane-9s

A group for those who use large or giant breed dogs for support and balance. "Discussion emphasis is on practical coping skills, training issues, and the human/service animal bond."

sdog.danawheels.net Service dogs and more.

And for resources near you, call your chapter of the National MS Society at **1-800-FIGHT-MS (1-800-344-4867)**.