

Ellie

The unmistakable sound of screeching tires alerted everyone within earshot that something bad was about to happen. That type of noise rarely precedes good things on city streets, and upon hearing it, the blind man spontaneously turned his head towards its source. At the same time, his guide dog instinctively tugged him forcefully in the opposite direction.

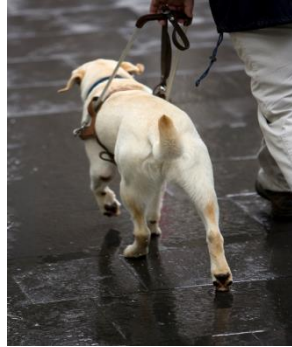
The emergency rescue team was on the scene in a matter of minutes. The small bag of groceries that the blind pedestrian was carrying had become soggy and ripped, spilling most of its contents on the street as he attempted to cross the marked intersection. The blind man, Rick Peterson, was taken to the local hospital where he was diagnosed with a badly sprained knee and an array of bruises on his arms and face. In a month or so he would be fine. The same couldn't be said for his loyal canine companion, Nikki, who did not survive. When later questioned about the accident, one tearful eyewitness stated that she believed that the spontaneous and intuitive move by the man's nine-year old service animal was directly responsible for saving his life.

Minutes before

The rain finally began to fall. The weather forecast called for heavy afternoon thunderstorms, and that was welcome news for everyone in the city with the exception of those pedestrians traveling without umbrellas. In this part of the state, there has been no measurable rainfall for over three months. Most of the neighborhood's lawns showed unsightly dry patches and had already begun to turn dreary shades of

brown. The local municipalities had issued mandatory water restrictions hoping to combat the drought and save that precious resource. Hopefully, the dark storm clouds that had gathered overhead would bring some relief.

That heavy gray cloud cover had created an unusually dark and gloomy atmosphere for three in the afternoon. It gave the appearance of early nightfall as many of the streetlights sensing dusk began to turn on. The temperature was falling, and had dropped more than ten degrees in the past hour. The darkness that preceded the impending storm caused drivers to turn on their



headlights so they would be easier to see for approaching motorists despite intermittent flashes of lightning in the distance. The streets had become coated with a slick sheen caused by the first drops of rain the local residents had seen in months. Slick and slippery roads commonly occur after the first rainfall following an extended dry spell. The wind gusted sporadically, twirling leaves and stray papers in random patterns. What began as a drizzle quickly increased in intensity and forced those who found themselves outdoors to scurry for cover.

Most people are careful drivers. They are taught that the four thousand pound vehicle they drive can be turned into a deadly weapon with just a few seconds of inattention or neglect. They instinctively know that when it rains, they need to reduce their speed, especially when they approach an intersection. Good drivers also know that their vehicles require a longer distance to stop on wet pavement. But there others

who remove themselves from the real world once they get behind the wheel. Their windows are closed and their climate-controlled and virtually soundproof interior isolates them from the world they are passing through as the drive. They play loud music from an array of speakers creating concert-like sounds and excessive vibrations as they drive. By doing so, they also mask the constantly world of constantly changing reality that exists outside of their vehicle.

The young driver of the shiny new black Dodge Challenger was running late. The rain that was now falling distressed him



because the evening before, he had spent over an hour washing and detailing his car so it was shiny and spotless. He even admired himself in disproportionate

reflections as he walked around the car and closely inspected his vehicle. Not wanting to miss a spot, he applied the finishing touches on the fenders and hood using a lint-free polishing cloth. When he was finished it looked perfect! But now it was raining, and his girlfriend would not be able to appreciate those efforts. Rain always has a way of slowing down traffic. That meant that his usual fifteen-minute drive across town would take a bit longer and he would have to make a phone call. Locating his cell phone on the passenger seat, he picked it up and punched in a number that was programmed into its speed dial. As that number was connecting, he tucked the phone between his left ear and shoulder and reached for the button on his radio with his right hand to lower the volume.

That process took less than four seconds and perhaps five beats of his windshield wipers, but when he looked up, he was startled to see that the light ahead of him was red. His reflexes immediately took over. Moving his right foot off the accelerator, he jammed on his brakes knowing that it was already too late to accelerate and clear the intersection. He needed to stop quickly. His “super-sport” package tires had ample tread to grip the road and stop quickly under normal circumstances, but the street was now slick. It was only then that saw the man and the dog in the crosswalk directly in front of him.

Almost two years earlier

“It looks like she’s ready,” Julie Miller announced to her two children who were kneeling on the floor next to Brandi, their very pregnant Labrador Retriever. The Miller family had been anticipating this event for the past several months. The large clock on their living room wall announced the time with a series of eight distinctive musical chimes. It was unusually warm and humid on this summer evening, and most of the windows of the large room were open, allowing a soft breeze to circulate throughout as it set off a series of harmonious wind chimes that hung from the patio rafters. She knew from previous experience that she would be up most of the night acting as a canine midwife. While her son and daughter would help, she would be doing most of the work. The dog’s breathing was becoming more rapid, and her legs were starting to kick involuntarily as she lay on her side. Each kick was also accompanied by a series of soft whimpers. “Judging from her size, she will probably have a litter of four to six puppies this time” she said to her husband Tim, who sat in a comfortable chair nearby accompanied by his ever-present guide dog, Max.

Tim responded, “This one should be a lot easier than her first. I could tell by the way she was acting that she was just about ready. She’s a little bigger around the middle than last time. My guess is six.” He then turned to Max and said, “What do you think, buddy?”

As if he answered in a language known only to Tim and perhaps other canines, he whined and shook his head making his ears slap against his head and neck mimicking the sound of a large bird’s flapping wings as it is about to take off in flight.

“Well, I lost count at how many Max thinks she will have. It sounded like a whole lot more than six, so I guess we’ll find out pretty soon, won’t we, buddy!”

Everything seemed to be ready. Earlier in the day Julie had retrieved the whelping box from the attic making sure it was clean and ready. The whelping box is designed as a safe and comfortable area for a dog to give birth and care for her newborn puppies. There are a number of variations and styles of whelping boxes, but all of them are designed to keep the mother comfortable and keep her newborn pups close. This is also the area where the newborn puppies would spend the first weeks of their lives.

“Will we get to hold them after they’re born?” innocently asked Jeffrey, her six-year old son. His eyes were wide with a mix of curiosity and wonder.



His sister quickly interrupted saying, “No, ‘cause you’ll probably drop them on their heads!”

“Moooooom!” cried Jeffrey in a whining voice intended by six-year olds to get their older siblings in trouble,

“she’s making fun of me. Tell her to stop!”

Julie turned to her children with a look that told them that right now she was all business. She ignored Sherri's last remark and said, "Yes, Jeffrey, but not right away. Brandi has to take care of her puppies first. All dogs are very protective of their pups, and those babies will be very fragile for the first few days." She turned as if just remembering something and said to her daughter, Sherri, "Honey, can you make sure we have enough towels . . . just in case? Go into the closet and get a few more hand towels and another big blanket." Then looking at her son she said, "And Jeffrey, you are in charge of the newspapers. Make sure we have enough so we don't run out."

At this point, Sherri was sitting on the floor next to Brandi, petting the dog's head and gently massaging her furry friend's ears. At times she would put her nose against the wet snout of her dog and give a reassuring Eskimo kiss constantly telling her not to worry and that everything would be fine. She had seen Brandi give birth before, but that was over two years ago, and she really didn't remember much about that event except that it was really messy. "OK, mom, I'll be right back" she replied and turned to Brandi and said, "Don't worry, I won't be long. Promise you won't start without me!"

This litter would mark the second for Brandi, a five year-old yellow Lab. Her pups would be in demand just like her last litter because of her exceptional and well-documented pedigree. There was also a proud history of service animals in her family tree, so the Millers had been very selective when it came time to breed Brandi. They were also aware of the "higher calling" that some members of her previous litter had experienced. Only a select few dogs are chosen to become service animals. Her husband, Tim, was an example of just how a well-trained service animal can help people readjust and lead a normal life after misfortune strikes.

Brandi's whimpering increased and became more persistent for the next two hours in anticipation of the arrival of her puppies. Sherri was particularly excited by the fact that she and her brother would be allowed to stay up late to see the new additions to her family. There are few things in life that can compare with witnessing new puppies come into the world. To young children, moments like these are filled with anticipation accompanied by lots of questions. There is also a certain degree of uncertainty that something could possibly go amiss.



Julie and Tim had been through this procedure several times in the past and had reviewed her puppy delivery checklist with their children.

✓ *A whelping box lined with paper and a baby blanket to use as a warming box for the pups until Brandi is finished delivering.*

✓ *A heating pad set on low and placed under the “puppy box.”*

✓ *A light baby blanket to drape over the box to cut any drafts.*

✓ *Clean hand towels to help dry and grasp wiggly pups.*

✓ *Extra newspapers to place over wet ones until the delivery is finished.*

✓ *Sterilized round tipped scissors for cutting cords.*

✓ *Thread for tying off leaky cords.*

✓ *A jar of petroleum jelly to help lubricate a stuck puppy.*

✓ *A note pad and pen to record the time of births.*

✓ *Color-coded collars to mark and identify each new pup.*

✓ *Veterinarian and emergency clinic phone numbers.*

Whelping

The pleasing musical chimes of the clock filled the room announcing ten o'clock, and as if on cue, Brandi began a series of intense contractions and the first of her pups started to arrive. Kneeling next to the whelping box, the first thing that caught the Miller children's attention was the emergence of a shiny and somewhat translucent black bubble.

Showing a mix of excitement and puzzlement, Jeffrey asked, "Is that gooey thing a puppy?"

"Not exactly," said Julie as she inched closer to Brandi sensing that she might need some help. That's the amniotic sac." Knowing that things would be happening rather quickly, her breathing became more rapid, similar in tempo to that of her pet. No matter how many times she had assisted as a doggie midwife in the past, she was still nervous. Pointing towards the slowly emerging sac, she said, "It's filled with fluid. The puppy is inside it." As the sac continued to emerge, the pup's head became visible.

"Yechhh!" muttered Jeffrey while contorting his face. "I thought puppies were supposed to be cute."

Both children were moving a bit closer, vying for prime vantage points and not wanting to miss anything.

"Come on, girl! Keep pushing!" said Julie. "Good girl! This seems like it is going to be a normal delivery. Thank God!" Taking another deep breath, she wiped her brow with one of the small hand towels she kept at her side.

Brandi continued her contractions and pushed until puppy number one was completely expelled. Her litter's first was delivered in the sac with the umbilical cord still inside the placenta. She then turned and broke the sac with her teeth and

began to clean her puppy. As she did this, she also expelled the rest of the placenta, all the while still undergoing contractions. She proceeded to chew on the cord to separate the newborn pup. Brandi continued licking the first puppy and actually nudged it around the whelping box with her nose to get its lungs working. She even allowed it to nurse as she readied herself for the next of her litter to be born.

Since she was the “big sister,” Sherri’s next job was to keep track of the exact time each pup was born and provide a different color nylon collar for identification of each newborn puppy.



“He’s a boy!” exclaimed Sherri. “I’ll get a blue collar.”

“Is he OK?” said Jeffrey looking at the first of the litter as his tired eyes widened despite the late hour. “He still looks like a wet blob!”

Julie, who was monitoring the situation had to chuckle at her son’s observation and said, “Yes, Jeffrey, he’s fine. See how Brandi is making sure that he is clean and can breathe on his own? That’s what mother dogs do.” Then, directing her attention at her daughter, she said, “Sherri, can you write down his time of birth as 10:10 p.m. and give me that blue collar you just picked out?” Then their attention immediately turned to Brandi as she continued the process for pup number two.

For the next two hours the birthing process continued until Julie was certain that all of the pups were delivered, healthy, and breathing on their own. There were five in all, four males and a lone female who was the last to arrive just before midnight.

With the arrival of the first female, Julie smiled and said to



her daughter, “Sherri, it looks like we can finally use that pink collar you’ve been holding for the past two hours.”

Despite the level of excitement that betrayed such a late hour for young children, a very tired eight-year old girl and a sleepy six year-old boy were still awake. Sherri seemed to be distracted and deep in thought. Within seconds, that proverbial light bulb went off in her head indicating that she had just come up with an idea. Nodding her head as an indication of self-agreement, she slowly turned to her mother and said, “Mom, I’ve got a name for her.” As she observed her mother affix the pink collar to what was the first and what would prove to be the only female of the litter, she triumphantly announced to everyone, “Welcome to the world, Ellie!”

Nobody in the Miller household got much sleep that night.

Tim Miller

Tim Miller was an outstanding college athlete in both baseball and basketball. He stood at 6’ 2” and always maintained his weight right at 190 pounds. There had never been more than ten percent body fat on his wiry frame, and that was due to his active life style and rigid physical conditioning. It was at college that he met Julie and they were married shortly after graduation. He was also a member of the Army Reserves, which allowed him to satisfy his military

obligation while finishing his education, and eventually enter the job market.

Less than one year later, Tim was called to active duty and sent to Afghanistan where on patrol, his unit became a victim of enemy sabotage. He was one of five soldiers wounded as the result of an explosion caused by a booby-trapped vehicle abandoned on the side of the road. Two of the soldiers who were the closest to the blast bore the brunt of that explosion and were killed. Tim and four surviving buddies were rescued and rushed to the nearest army emergency facility for treatment.



After a lengthy hospital stay, Tim was released and returned to the States. He was also diagnosed with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). CTE is a degenerative brain disorder most commonly seen in professional athletes who experience multiple concussions from blows to the head. It was determined that his condition was caused by his proximity to the explosion. Symptoms usually include headaches, irritability, depression and short-term memory loss. As this condition progresses, it could lead to hemorrhages and brain aneurysms.

Because of his strong resolve and determination, Tim's rehabilitation sessions went well. Despite the virtual 180-degree turn his life had just taken, he refused to elicit pity from anyone or feel sorry for himself. Shortly thereafter, Tim's team of doctors announced that the time was right, and he was fitted for his new prosthetic leg. There was one thing more. Because

of the injuries to his head and his optic nerves, he was also declared legally blind.

Tim Miller had to learn how to live all over again.

The road to Tim's recovery was complex and filled with all the fear and uncertainty that accompanies the unknown. The government eased a great deal of the financial burden by paying for his therapy and rehabilitation sessions that were both time consuming and physically exhausting. There were days he made it on sheer will power and determination. It was not in his DNA to quit. Another thing that kept him going was a solemn promise he had repeatedly made to his wife, and that promise was that they would have children. It was then that his wife affectionately began calling him her "angel with a broken wing."

As his rehabilitation program progressed, his doctors determined that he was ready for the next step. If he were going to regain his independence, it meant that he would have to learn to get around on his own. Being classified as legally blind (which was Tim's classification) and being totally blind are two separate conditions. Tim's doctors determined that he qualified for a service animal—a seeing-eye dog, and began the application process immediately.

The definition of legal blindness is "... central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the use of a correcting lens, or an eye which is accompanied by a limitation in the fields of vision such that the widest diameter of the visual field subtends an angle no greater than 20 degrees."

Tim, meet Max!

The drive to the Guide Dog Academy was just under four hours. Despite the number of qualified service animals we see

Guide Dogs of America



Finding The Way Together



every day, there are only seventeen certified dog training facilities in the United States. The first guide dog training schools were established in Germany during World War I to enhance the mobility of returning veterans who were blinded in combat. Today's guide dogs are trained to lead blind and visually impaired people around obstacles. Although dogs can be trained to navigate various hindrances, they are partially color blind in the red-green spectrum, and are not capable of interpreting common street signs. The human half of the guide dog team does the directing, based upon skills acquired through their specialized training.

Since Tim met the criteria for receiving a service animal, pairing him with a specific guide dog was the next step. One week after completing a series of social and psychological tests, which was part of the application process, he was informed that there was a canine match that was in the process of finishing the last stages of training. The time and details of their meeting were enclosed in registered letter that Julie excitedly opened and read to him through tears of joy that she constantly had to wipe away. Within two days, their bags were packed and they were on their way to meet the newest addition to their family. Their lives were about to change again.

What they didn't know at the time was that his future canine companion, an eighteen-month-old Labrador Retriever named Max, had just completed his final training at the Academy. Max was an extraordinary dog, excelling in all of the areas that Tim would rely on the most to help him achieve an active life style. The two would train together at the facility

for the next few weeks under the watchful eyes of the Academy's staff before heading home as partners.

Guide dogs are some of the most highly trained working animals you will ever encounter. Thousands of hours of training have been put into building that unique canine-human partnership, and that training regimen typically begins as early as six weeks after birth. This is when the pups are turned over to volunteers called puppy handlers. During that critical phase

of training, these unpaid handlers take the young pups into their homes and introduce them to a structured socialization program that includes everything from house manners to commands



and general obedience. Puppy handlers also familiarize these dogs with virtually all of the scenarios they will encounter as part of their new lives as service animals. This training attempts to minimize the elements of surprise that even a simple walk in the park might produce. Situations like wearing the harness, going to public places, ignoring distractions, and yes, even play time, are integral parts of this structured curriculum. The program also put into practice these three basic criteria:

- Reward and repetition
- Recognize barriers
- Intelligent disobedience

Volunteer puppy handlers raise these dogs during the most formative period of their young lives, and have them as constant companions for twelve to fourteen months before

returning them to the Guide Dog Academy for their final specialized training. It is always a sad time for the puppy handlers as they return their puppies to the training academy after living with these beautiful animals for over a year. Predictably, there are always tearful good-byes accompanied by a tremendous sense of pride.

At fourteen to sixteen months, qualified dogs begin their formal service animal training. This critical training phase is usually completed within two to three months as it was in Max's case. It was at shortly thereafter that Tim received his letter.

Tim and Julie were nervous. Perhaps it was simply the anticipation of the events that were soon to come and the changes that would occur. They would be among four other qualified guide dog recipients scheduled to meet their new partners that day. In their letter, they learned that their dog's name was Max. As per the instructions included in that letter, once they arrived at the entrance to the Academy, they should proceed to the visitor's parking area and locate their personalized space indicated by a sign that would read, *Reserved for Tim, Julie, and Max Miller*. That brought a smile to Tim's lips when his wife located the sign and read the wording out loud to her husband. The Guide Dog Academy resembled a small college campus rather than a facility that trained service animals. The campus had several buildings and the signage clearly marked their destination.

The lobby of the Academy's main building was immaculately clean. It resembled a warm but cozy version of a hospital waiting room, complete with bright and cheerful lighting and a highly polished floor. Adorning the walls were pictures of recent graduates along with their new human partners. Tim and Julie went directly to the visitor's window to check in. Upon identifying themselves to the young woman

who greeted them with a genuine smile, their paperwork was pulled and verified. Everything was in order. This was done quickly, and they were directed to semi-private section of the lobby to wait. There were a number of doors that led to hallways and various adjoining rooms, some were partially revealed by glass partitions. There was a slight echo that reverberated with each person's footsteps. Even the most subdued conversations were amplified to a degree.

The apprehensive whispers that permeated the room were quieted when the words, "Timothy Miller?" were announced by a voice emanating from a partially opened door.

With that, Tim raised his hand and said, "I'm Tim Miller."

The man wearing a colorful blue polo shirt and khaki pants in lieu of the expected white smock replied "Hi, I'm Jonathan, one of your dog's trainers here at the Academy. Could you please come with me?"

With that, Tim stood up and took hold of Julie's arm. The two began walking towards Jonathan who held out his free hand and formally greeted them with a warm handshake.

"Pleased to meet you, Jonathan," replied Tim as he and his wife passed through the door that was held open for them. The three walked down a narrow hallway that led to a mini conference room. Jonathan directed them to the small oval shaped table at which they sat down facing each other. There were a few seconds of awkward silence as Jonathan shuffled through the papers in his file folder. That silence was broken by Tim when he said, "I really didn't know what to expect here today."

Jonathan interjected, "Relax, Tim. First of all, you will be getting one of the finest animals I've ever had the privilege of training. Max is really a remarkable dog with exceptionally keen instincts and from what I've seen first-hand, a very short learning curve." He then went on to explain that most dogs,

upon meeting their new partners, are a bit shy and somewhat withdrawn and to expect such a reaction. He also told them not to get discouraged by this because it is natural and the way most canine-human partnerships begin. The “warm and fuzzy feeling” that everyone expects to happen between a guide dog and its new partner rarely occurs immediately, and might not happen for a week or two.

Tim and Julie signed an array of papers that seemed as if it would never end. The scene reminded them of what they went through at the bank when they closed the mortgage on their house.

“Are your fingers tired from all of those signatures?” Jonathan joked.

Julie replied, “They sure don’t miss anything. I think I just relinquished my first born child.”

Jonathan quickly reviewed all of the papers and proclaimed, “Everything seems to be in order. Now, let’s meet Max!” He picked up an in-house telephone located near his right hand and punched in a number. “Kristen, can you bring Max to room number ten?”



Jonathan led Tim and Julie down a narrow, well-lit corridor that was lined with doors on both sides, each bearing a large block number. Room number ten was the last one on the right. When they entered the room, they noted that there was a small table, four sitting chairs and a door at the far end of the room containing a

large glass window. Just entering the room from that door was an attractive young woman, her dark hair pulled straight back into a ponytail, dressed in the same colors as Jonathan. She was holding a short leash that tethered a healthy and fine-looking Labrador Retriever, Max.

Max reacted to meeting Tim as if her were reunited with a long-lost friend. This was unusual and totally unexpected in light of Jonathan's statement less than five minutes earlier when he warned of the caution and uncertainty these dogs usually demonstrate in this situation. As Julie, Kristen, and Jonathan stood nearby in amazement, Max nuzzled into Tim's lap as his tail wagged uncontrollably! Although Tim is legally blind, he can see things at a very close range. He held out his hands placed them under Max's face gently pulling him close to his nose so he could get a better look. That gesture was met with a series of licks that brought smiles and a chorus of laughter from everyone.

The next two weeks flew by. Before they knew it their portion of the formal training program was complete and Julie, Tim, and Max were back home. There were new rules that everyone needed to follow, especially the rule that required Max to be tethered at night for the first few weeks. Despite what some people are told, guide dogs can play . . . but not all the time. Playtime is only when the harness is off. Guide dogs need time to play as a family pet, and that playtime is essential to maintaining the strength of the bond between the dog, his partner, and his new family. Everyone at the Miller house learned to respect this aspect of Max's disciplinary training.

Puppy Handlers

The Millers were amazed at just how quickly time marked the six weeks since Brandi's latest litter. That period was the critical time required by the puppies to be nurtured and cared for by both their mother and their new human family. The Millers weren't new to living with and raising this special variety of dog. Ever since Tim received Max several years earlier, they learned that many dogs do indeed have a "higher calling" in their lives.

Tim and Julie knew that The Academy had very strict standards relating to the pedigree and temperament of the dogs that could be accepted into their Guide Dog Program, so they maintained a special working relationship with the Guide Dog Academy. Julie became



certified in those procedures and worked hard at doing everything "by the book," enabling her to be one of the exceptions in the Academy's strict puppy breeding program. Brandi's first litter saw four of her puppies go through the puppy handler stage and eventually into the Academy's formal guide dog program sixteen months later. During the past six weeks, Julie had continually kept the staff at the Guide Dog Academy up to date regarding the progress of her "five exceptional future guide dogs" that would soon be ready to take the next step in helping the visually impaired. Behind the scenes, the staff at the Academy had been on the telephone with several volunteer puppy handlers (some from as far away as North Carolina and Alabama) who were now ready for another fourteen months of dedicated training. At the eight-

week mark, Tim and Julie would pack their van and make the four-hour trip to the Guide Dog Academy to enable their staff to complete the selection process and assign their “babies” to their puppy handlers.

Melissa

Melissa resides in rural North Carolina in a house that could have been the subject matter for a Bert Williams painting. Her home sits on almost four acres of property with plenty of open space. During the spring and summer, there are abundant patches of green and leafy shade



trees. During the winter when snow blankets the terrain, the pine trees that are randomly located throughout the property give it the look of a real-time Christmas card. She and her husband have been puppy handlers for the past eight years, and their success rate as trainers consistently ranks as one of the highest. Early that morning, she began her trip to Florida and the Guide Dog Academy to pick up her next training assignment.

She knew the routine well, and her thoughts went back to that day almost four months ago that she drove the same route to return the last puppy she had trained, a Black Lab named Lucy to the Academy. She recalled that tearful good bye, but also affectionately remembered the tears of joy as she

witnessed Lucy being introduced to her new partner. As she drove through the rolling hills of North Carolina along one of the most beautiful stretches of highway in the country, she had time to think, and reinforce her belief in why she volunteered for this type of program.

I've always believed that dogs this intelligent have a much greater purpose in life than to simply be someone's pet. It's all about helping these dogs realize their full potential. That's how I help make a difference. Maybe that's why I always have these mixed emotions. It makes my day when I see dogs I've raised meet their new partners knowing that their lives are about to change, but each time it gets harder and harder to let them go.

She also recalled Lucy poking her nose through the space that separated the two front seats, looking around and taking in the scenery. Melissa could also see from the series of nose prints along the side windows that she had already made the most of those views also. That day, Lucy instinctively knew that something was different. Perhaps it was the small suitcase that Melissa had tried to sneak out of the house and place in the car that was her indicator. Nevertheless, Lucy loved car rides as her wagging tail confirmed. She was carefully trained in all of the basics of mobility and received high marks in



those areas. She was at ease during her walks, regardless of the environment, and she handled distractions like squirrels, cats, and other dogs almost like they didn't

exist. She was also exceptional with children, which is another key to becoming a good guide dog. But this morning, Melissa made the trip alone. She would be picking up her newest student, an eight-week-old Yellow Lab named Ellie.

Melissa knew her way around the campus of the Guide Dog Academy. She always tried to arrive at the Academy earlier than her actual appointment because there was always something happening. That day it was puppy hugging. This is an event sponsored by the Academy in which the public is invited to come in and actually handle and play with the puppies. The reasoning behind this activity is to help these young dogs achieve a level of socialization that is needed in developing the complex personalities of service animals. It will also help them to become comfortable with all kinds of people and everyday distractions. Later, these dogs will learn to focus on their jobs, but for now, it was nothing but playtime and fun!

As she peered through the large bay window, she could see that puppy hugging was already in progress. Several adults and a few children were sitting on the carpeted floor as ten eight to ten week old puppies scampered from person to person, tumbling over each other in those scrambles for affection. Some carried chew toys while others chased a ball that rolled just out of their reach. She had to smile and wondered if one of those pups was Ellie. She watched as a young girl, she estimated her age to be five or six, lay on her back giggling as two puppies took turns licking her face despite continuing protests from her mother. Melissa lingered at the window for another five minutes before deciding to move on to the Academy's cafeteria for a much needed cup of coffee. She had almost an hour to go before her appointment.

At precisely three o'clock, Melissa checked into the Academy's training center for that appointment. Since the staff

knew her, pulling her files and moving along to the next step in the process went quickly. Within ten minutes, Wendy, a staff trainer who specialized in this portion of the program, came to meet her.

“Hi Wendy,” Melissa said with a genuine smile. “Where’s my new baby?”

Wendy had to laugh. “You sure like to move things right along, don’t you? We just have to finish some paperwork first. How was the trip down from Charlotte?”

“Not too bad this time. I made it here in less than eight hours and only stopped once for gas and coffee,” she said holding up a half-empty Styrofoam cup and nodding her head good-naturedly.

They sat at a small table as Melissa neatly scribed her signature on the required forms, handing them one at a time to Wendy as she finished.

“OK, that’s about it” said Wendy. “They should be just about through with puppy hugging so we can take a walk over there now.



Melissa then said, “You know, I passed by that window a few minutes ago and had a feeling that I was looking at Ellie. Call it karma . . . only I just wasn’t sure.”

“Oh, if you’re talking about the 2:00 session, then you probably did. She was the only female Yellow Lab in the group today. That puppy’s tail goes non-stop. You are just going to love her!”

Puppy Heaven

Somewhere in the world of imagination, there is a place called Puppy Heaven. This is the place where puppies are allowed to roam free, get into all sorts of harmless mischief, and do nothing all day but play. There, they can enjoy the fleeting moments of puppyhood without fear of being scolded for picking up someone's bathroom slipper or testing the leg of a wooden table to see how it tasted. But since such a place really doesn't exist, the closest you can come in the real world is the play area at the Guide Dog Academy that houses the eight to ten week-old puppies just before they are turned over to their volunteer puppy handlers for the next phase of their training. That was the destination for Melissa and Wendy.

Wendy and two other staff members had put together a package containing everything Melissa would need for training Ellie. Since this procedure was familiar to her, she looked over the contents in the large canvas tote bag that contained several leashes, a tie-down tether, bibs, and harnesses that would take into consideration Ellie's growth for the next year. There were also items like nail clippers, baby wipes, ear cleaner solution, grooming brushes, and even a special toothbrush and toothpaste intended specifically for young dogs.

As Melissa reviewed the bag's contents, she said jokingly, "It looks like I have everything but a puppy in here."

"Hey, it's possible. Have you checked all the way to the bottom?"

"No, but I'm getting there. You do know I have most of this stuff at home already. Maybe we can save the Academy some money if we recycled a few of these duplicate items to someone else."

With this repartee continuing, a young female staff worker entered the room. She was carrying a twelve-pound beige

bundle of wriggling paws, flopping ears, and a tail that would not stop wagging.

Upon seeing her fellow trainer, Wendy announced, “Hi Chrissy . . . and speaking of our little princess.”

Chrissy had briefly met Melissa once before, but introduced herself as a matter of formality. “Hi, you must be our star puppy handler, Melissa. I’ve brought you one of my all-time favorites.” Then, holding Ellie up with outstretched arms and bringing her to eye level, she moved her face close to the puppy’s and said, “I want to get a good look at you, because when you come back next year, you will be all grown up!”

And so, the next chapter of Ellie’s young life was about to begin.

Rural North Carolina

Raising and training a young dog in a rural environment has many advantages, the most obvious of which is that there is plenty of space to run, exercise and simply have fun. The change of seasons also

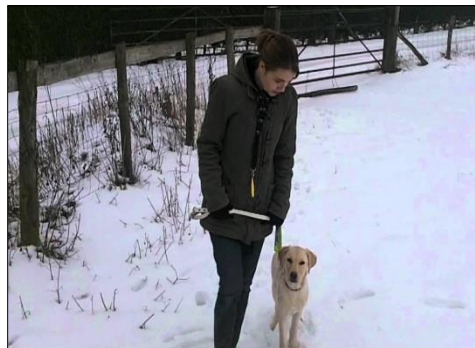


affords a mixture of warm summers and cool and every so often snowy winters. Inside Melissa’s house were areas specifically designed with puppy training and that learning process in mind. Within her bedroom was a puppy crate, the place where Ellie would spend nights and certain pre-arranged parts of her days. She would quickly learn the discipline of

house manners, tethering, and relieving herself outdoors. Repetition and reward were key elements, along with love, gentle guidance, and consistent care.

The fact that Melissa lived less than a thirty-minute drive from metropolitan Charlotte, North Carolina meant that there would also be frequent trips to the city to build and reinforce Ellie's social behavior. On a given day, there might be a trip to a mall, a walk in a park, and even a pre-arranged trek through Douglas International Airport. Ellie would also learn by conditioning that she was "at work" whenever her bib and later her harness was on, and "play time" when they were removed. She was on a strict diet (no people food), and Melissa followed the proper regimen for flea, tick, and heartworm prevention. Jumping on furniture was also taught to be off limits, and the strict procedures for hand, voice, and leash commands were constantly reinforced and became second nature to Ellie.

Spring gave way to the early sunrises and late sunsets of summer, and before anyone knew, trees were began showing off their beautiful autumn colors as fall arrived. Ellie celebrated her first birthday with her foster family in the rolling hills of central North Carolina. That event also marked the halfway point of her puppy handling training. She was progressing nicely, and showed exceptional skills relating to the awareness of her surroundings as well as discipline when it



came to ignoring distractions. She was growing rapidly, and

now tipped the scales at a trim and muscular sixty-three pounds.

The next six months went by quickly. With mixed emotions, Melissa had finished making the arrangements for her next trip to The Guide Dog Academy. She had just reported the successful progress of Ellie's training and pronounced her ready for the next phase. During that conversation with a lead member of the Academy's training staff, she learned that they had a match for Ellie, a forty-three year old man named Rick Peterson who had lost his faithful guide dog just a month earlier in a traffic accident.

Rick Peterson

The recovery period for his injuries passed quickly. The discoloration from the trauma that marked his arms and shoulders was gone, and once the brace was removed, his knee healed as expected. His doctors saw to it that he exercised properly in order to avoid a pronounced limp and any atrophy that might occur. But there was a huge void in his life. There was hardly a minute that went by that his thoughts didn't go back to his devoted guide dog, Nikki. The inside of his house remained untouched regarding Nikki's things. Her empty food and water bowls remained on the customized pad next to the counter on his kitchen floor. The comfortable mat that served as her bed still lay on the floor of his bedroom. Those possessions now seemed as empty as his life had become. The man and his dog were constant companions for more than eight years, and now she was gone. During his hospital stay, the staff helped guide him around, but returning home to his empty house seemed to hurt more than his physical injuries. While he thoroughly knew the layout of his home having

customized it to accommodate him and his disability, he felt totally lost without Nikki.



sign of weakness for a grown man to cry. His father told him that on a number of occasions.

Growing up, weren't all of us taught that the male of the

species was supposed to be the strongest? Part of that persona was to show everyone that our insides were just as tough as our outsides. Showing outward emotion was perceived as weakness. After all, no one ever saw John Wayne cry. Rick had been at his father's side when they laid his grandfather to rest. He vividly remembered that graveside ceremony when his dad read his prepared eulogy from a single sheet of paper. He remembered his father's hands shaking as he was doing his best to fight back tears that tried their best to escape. He also remembered fighting back his own tears because even as a ten year old, he wanted people to think of him as the strong young man his father raised him to be.

But there were times, like this particular morning, when Rick was alone in his empty house that he felt the need to cry. Somehow he knew that crying might help relieve the pain he still felt inside, but it simply was not in him to do it. People had told him that shedding tears was a natural way to relieve his stress, and that here was nothing wrong with crying. The inside of his home was also a sanctuary . . . a place where he

could go when he needed to be totally alone. There, he could become immersed in thought and escape . . . totally hidden from others. Within the walls that surrounded him during times like these, he could try his best to figure things out. He was past the stage of “why me?” and had moved on to the next phase of recovering from yet another tragedy that had pressed its way into his life. The past thirty days had been extremely trying. There were times he used music as a refuge because this method of self-therapy had worked in the past. He had learned to appreciate different styles of music, especially after his vision declined. This morning he started listening to jazz, but that only seemed to fuel his depression. Quickly he switched to country music. He knew that certain country songs could lighten his somber mood, and that he could immerse himself in the clever lyrics that were a part of many of those songs. But sometimes, even the choice of country music can backfire, especially if the theme of the song is about a man and his loyal dog. It also didn’t help that he was holding an eight by ten picture of his departed canine companion as that particular song began to play.

Whenever an individual survives an accident and someone close to him doesn’t, it is natural to become besieged with Survivor’s Guilt—a psychological condition that occurs when a person perceives himself to have done wrong by surviving a traumatic event when others did not. In truth, the survivor, Rick, was saved by his guide dog whose instinctive actions yanked him hard in the opposite direction and away from the eventual impact of the skidding car.

During his recovery period, Rick relied on his retractable white cane to help him get around when he was outside. Since he knew his neighborhood well, he could manage. Everyone in his development had heard about the accident that had cost Rick his guide dog, and most of his neighbors went out of their

way to help by walking with him through intersections and asking him if he needed groceries or other necessities. Relying on others was not something Rick enjoyed. He had made a living as a successful construction company's site manager. It was at one of those project sites that he became



the victim of a freak accident when the mobile construction crane that was clearing debris from the fourth floor of a building he was overseeing accidentally swung its boom too wide, and without warning dropped almost a third of its load striking a group of workers below. Among the injured was Rick Peterson. The blow to his head from debris that fell nearly forty feet resulted in his impaired vision, despite the fact that he was wearing a safety vest and the required hard hat. Later he was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Visual Loss. While not totally blind, he was left with a limited field of vision. He could see things up close, but only at that reduced distance. Within a short period of time thereafter, his doctors classified him as Legally Blind. The complex and usually lengthily process of pairing him with a service animal began immediately. Within two months those efforts were rewarded as he was matched with Nikki and their training as partners began.

It was ten o'clock on that dreary and rainy morning when Rick's cell phone rang. As he reached for the control to lower the music that was playing loudly, he brought his cell phone

close to his face and looked at number that was displayed by his caller ID. That number sparked a flash of recognition as he pushed the call button. The female voice on the other end confirmed what he had suspected.

“Hello, this is Rick.”

“Rick Peterson, good morning, this is Susan from The Guide Dog Academy. How are you today?”

Because he wasn't expecting a call from The Academy so soon, he was a bit slow in comprehending exactly what was happening. As the recognition factor set in, his spirits quickly picked up and soon matched the cheerful demeanor of the caller. Rick answered, “I'm fine. What can I do for you?”

Susan answered, “I'm calling to let you know that we have a guide dog for you.”

Rick began to smile and could barely hide his excitement. In moments like these, people have a need to share good news, but he was alone, so he looked up, nodded his head, and mouthed a silent “thank you” to someone above. “That's great! It's nice to know that the Man upstairs has been listening to me. Wow! What can you tell me about the dog?”

“This beautiful animal just finished her puppy handler training and will be at The Academy this Saturday. She is an eighteen-month old Yellow Lab named Ellie, and she should be just perfect for you. Can you make arrangements to be here Saturday afternoon?”

Without hesitation, Rick said, “Yes, I'll be there. I only need to make one phone call to arrange it, and that shouldn't be a problem.”

“Great, I'll make the preparations for your stay and training with Ellie and our staff. You'll also get to meet Melissa, Ellie's puppy handler. She will be there. She is perhaps the person who knows your new partner better than anyone.”

“That sounds like a real plus . . . and I believe I’ve met her. Wasn’t Melissa from North Carolina the puppy handler for Nikki eight years ago?” asked Rick.

Susan paused for a moment. Rick could hear her shuffling through what sounded like a stack of papers as he listened over the telephone. After a moment she finally said, “Yes, she definitely was Nikki’s trainer. Now *that* is an amazing coincidence!”

“She sure did a great job with Nikki. Well . . . you know that story . . . and I’ll bet she’s gotten even better with those additional years of practice.”

“From what I’ve seen in the reports, her dogs are consistently among the best trained. She definitely has a gift for this sort of thing. So, getting back to Saturday, I’ll make sure that everything will be in order when you get here. See you then.”

“You know, Susan, you just made my day! I’ll definitely be there.” Rick then clicked off his phone and breathed a sigh of relief as he began to fully comprehend what had just happened. He was now certain that his life was about to take that well-deserved turn for the better.

Ellie the Pup

When Saturday finally arrived, Rick found himself on the campus of the Guide Dog Academy accompanied by his next door neighbor Sally, who was one of those genuinely nice people all of us would love to have as a friend and neighbor. She was a single woman in her late forties who could be considered an empty nester because both of her children were away at college. Knowing Rick’s situation, she made it part of her daily routine to check in on him. She would always give

him a call whenever she was going to the store to see if he needed something. Sometimes, she just called to say hello.

After Rick removed his travel case from the trunk of her car which contained everything he would need for the next two weeks of training, Sally took his arm as the two headed to the reception area.

“You’re not talking much today. I’ve never known you to be this quiet.” Sally said to him as they walked.

Rick replied, “I’m sorry. I guess my mind is working overtime this morning. Part of me still really misses Nikki. It’s only been a month since . . . well . . . you know . . . the accident. Deep down, I don’t think anyone or anything can replace her. But there is another part of me that is really excited about meeting Ellie. Do you know what I mean?”

“I think so. Life is strange, but most times things go full circle.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you are alive and here today because of Nikki, and that circle of life will continue with your new dog. Does that make sense to you? I know Ellie won’t be Nikki, but life goes on. It has to! You are way too strong to give up. You survived that accident because you were meant to survive. And in some way, you were also destined to partner with Ellie. There are too many things coming together with this. I also believe that the puppy handler who trained Nikki and who also happened to be Ellie’s trainer supports my theory.”

Rick had to smile. “Do you really believe all of that?”

She stopped in mid-stride, looked directly at Rick and emphatically said, “Yes, I really do. My father was a police officer and he told me that there are *no* coincidences in life. Things happen for reasons, many of which are way beyond our limited intellectual capacity. So, are you ready to meet your new partner?”

“Sally, you amaze me. I don’t know what I’d do without you. And answering your question, yes, I’m ready!”

Full Circle

Melissa had just arrived at the Academy. As she drove through the campus and into the main parking area, she noticed a woman and a man walking towards the building’s entrance. What caught her attention was the fact that the couple walked arm-in-arm, and that the man was pulling a rolling suitcase. *I’m not sure, but I wonder if that’s Rick, Ellie’s future partner. He looks somewhat familiar, but that was over eight years ago when I trained Nikki. What happened to her was so unfortunate, but even then, I knew that dog was special . . .* She pulled into a parking space and said to her canine passenger, “OK, Ellie, this is it. Are you ready?” Ellie looked at her and wagged her tail rapidly. Melissa wasn’t sure if it was the end of the car ride or the dog’s memory of the Academy’s familiar surroundings that set off those reflex actions. Ellie then jumped out of the car and sat next to Melissa awaiting further instructions, just as she was taught to do.

Behind the scenes, the staff at the Academy had everything in order. They were expecting both Rick and Melissa, but at different times, and in separate areas of the facility. Rick and Sally headed towards the lobby to check in while Melissa and Ellie walked to the kennel area.

Sometimes things in life are destined to happen. As Sally waited with Rick in the lobby, she could tell that despite his stoic outward appearance, he was uncharacteristically nervous. *Expectancy and anticipation can create a degree of fear that can intimidate the best of us,* she thought as she watched him clasp and unclasp his hands and tap his fingers on his thigh as

he fidgeted anxiously in his chair. Even though he had been through this process before, there was always that element of the unknown.

Rick's thoughts drifted back to that day over eight years ago . . . the day he was first introduced to Nikki. It happened right here in this building. The dog's initial reaction to him was not the warm and friendly greeting he had wanted and felt he needed and deserved. The staff at the Academy had warned him that introductions between guide dogs and their new partners are seldom "love at first sight" on the dog's part, and that's what he remembered about that encounter. Nikki shied away from him and kept nudging herself towards her puppy trainer, Melissa, and her familiar scent.

"It might take her a few days to fully warm up to you, and once you leave here, there will be an additional learning curve for her at your home" said her trainer, and he was correct on both counts. But once Nikki warmed up to Rick, that remarkable partnership bond was sealed. Deep down, Rick hoped this meeting would be different in that respect and that Ellie would pick up right where Nikki left off. Somehow, he needed that to happen especially after what he had just been through. Well, at least he could hope.

When the receptionist told Rick that they were ready for him, his nervousness kicked up another notch. He forced himself to calm down, because he knew that dogs are capable of sensing changes in human emotions, and he didn't want to make a bad first impression. As strange as that notion might sound to someone outside of his situation, deep down, he knew it was important. Dogs have long and very accurate memories. Taking a deep breath, he stood up and with a look of resolve and determination on his face said to Sally, "Let's complete that 'full circle' you've been talking about."

If Rick were in fact nervous at that point, no one now looking at him could tell. He was a picture of a strong, focused, and determined man with a purpose. Part of this resolve stemmed from the fact that he had been through this same process before and knew what to expect; but more importantly, how to act. As he walked with Sally down the long corridor that led to the kennels, thoughts of what was about to happen flashed through his mind at lightning-quick speeds. Thirty days of anticipation, frustration, and depression were about to come to an end.

Déjà vu

What happened next could support the theory that fact can often be stranger than fiction. The building, the hallway, and even the voices of the Academy's staff were all familiar to the point that Rick's mind began putting together events and scenarios before they happened. As he and Sally entered the room in which they would be introduced to their new trainers, the Academy's support staff, and of course, Ellie, he could vividly foresee what was going to happen next in his mind. The necessary stacks of paperwork, the preliminary admonishment by the staff that "most dogs, upon meeting their new partners, are shy and somewhat withdrawn, and to expect that type of reaction" all seemed like a rerun of the event Rick experienced over eight years ago with Nikki.

Just then, two women entered the room. The younger of the two was wearing the Academy staff's uniform—a colorful blue polo shirt and khaki pants, and the other, a dark-haired middle-aged woman, was dressed in civilian clothes. A beautiful young and energetic Labrador Retriever accompanied them. Instinctively, Rick rose from his chair and faced the trio.

Melissa was the first to speak as her eyes moved directly to Rick.

“Rick Peterson! It’s been too long . . . in fact, eight years to be exact. How are you? I’m Melissa, Ellie’s puppy handler, and this is Wendy, one of the Academy’s best trainers.”

Rick knew the voice. As she moved closer, he was able to take in a close-up image of her face. The recognition factor took over and he couldn’t help but produce a genuine smile. “Melissa! This is really incredible. You were Nikki’s puppy handler, and now it looks like you’re still working your magic.”

Introductions were made all around, and what followed was a brief period of silence that lapsed into a moment of awkwardness. This situation was fairly common when a person was introduced to his or her future guide dog partner. Everyone took seats on the cushioned sofas that were arranged in an angled semi-circle. Wendy broke that short period of silence as she brought Ellie around the table to the corner area where Sally, Rick, and Melissa were sitting. Despite the size of the room, the sitting area was in the far corner, so everyone was gathered close together.

Wendy continued speaking. “It’s times like these that make my job so enjoyable. This is when the puppy handler who has spent the last fourteen months training your future guide dog gets to meet you, our student. We all know that dogs like these have a much higher calling in life than simply being someone’s pet. Our goal is to help your dog reach her ultimate potential and help you move forward with your life.” She paused and looked down at the dog sitting attentively at her side and said, “This young lady is Ellie.”

Ellie was a beautiful dog. She was immaculately groomed and had a striking pair of intelligent brown eyes that denoted a strong sense of awareness of her surroundings. They also had a certain sparkle indicating a playful side that



would need to take second place in her future job as a service animal. She sat at Wendy's side assuming the position of a well-trained guide dog. At times, she would glance in Melissa's direction, still showing a sign of allegiance to her recent trainer. Each time she looked in Melissa's direction, her tail wagged in short spurts as if to say, *Maybe I shouldn't be doing this, but I do see my friend and want her to know that I notice.*

Wendy went on to say, "Rick, your learning curve will be considerably shorter than most because you have partnered with a service animal. But that doesn't mean that things in the process haven't changed. As a progressive institute, the Academy always solicits input from both trainers and people like you and puppy handlers like Melissa. The next two weeks will still be a learning experience for both you and Ellie."

At that point, Melissa got up from her seat and moved to sit down next to Rick. As she sat down, she motioned for Ellie to come. Ever obedient, Ellie sprang to her feet and covered the short distance quickly. Rick held out his hand for Ellie to sniff and in doing so, he reached around her head and gently rubbed

behind her ears. But when he stopped, Ellie's attention quickly shifted back to Melissa and her tail began to wag.

No! Tell me this is not happening. I really need this to work, and I don't believe anyone knows how badly I need this. Please, God. Not this time. Especially not this time.

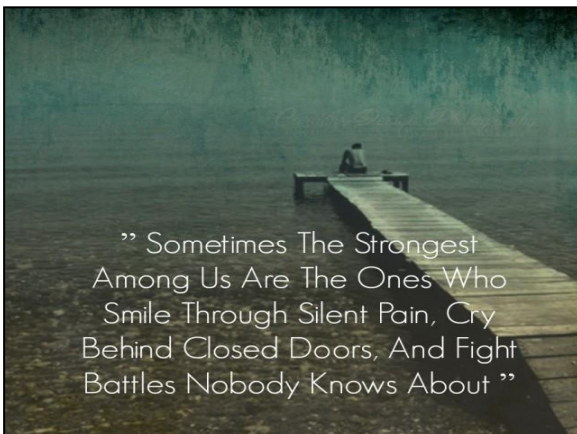
"We sometimes forget that she was a puppy before she became a guide dog" said Wendy. "There's still a lot of that puppy in her, and all of that is good. You'll really enjoy that facet of her personality when it comes to play time."

Unnoticed by the rest of the group during this preliminary meeting was the fact that Rick's attention had drifted somewhere else. While his gaze was fixed somewhere in the vicinity of Melissa and Ellie, he remained silent and hadn't spoken for a while. He appeared to be in a self-imposed state of detachment. During this brief interlude, he had slowly retreated into "Rick's world," that state of avoidance that had frequently entered at home when he felt he couldn't cope, but this never happened in public or while in the company of others. People in the room were talking. Things were happening around him, and he heard the words, but he wasn't listening. Emotions were playing different roles within his mind and pulling him in several directions. The thought that hit him the hardest was the worst-case scenario in which his new dog would not bond with him. Somehow he thought that it had just happened. He felt that Ellie had rejected him.

Well, you aren't Nikki. No dog is or ever could be. I know that she set an extremely high set of standards that I'm not sure you can meet . . . Stop! That's the worst-case scenario I keep thinking about and it didn't happen. She still might warm up to me. Maybe. That's the way it was with Nikki. I probably have nothing to worry about. But what if she doesn't? Give it time. Just give all of this time. If only she could sense just how much I need her . . .

Rick's attention was quickly snapped back to reality when Ellie uncharacteristically turned her head away from Melissa and nudged her nose under Rick's left hand that he had left simply hanging at his side, motionless. He let it simply remain there after he had scratched Ellie's ears only to note that she quickly returned to Melissa's side. Dogs can sense things relating to feelings and emotions that people easily miss. When Rick didn't respond at first, Ellie's wet nose nudged him two more times. This time, Rick turned, bent at the waist, and with both hands took Ellie's face and looked into her eyes at close range, permitting him to get a clear image of his new partner. Ellie surprised everyone by violating a rule that had been ingrained into her temperament since the early days of her training: *Never jump up on people!* She placed her front paws in his lap and began licking his face enthusiastically. Despite the bewilderment of her trainers at such a bold move, everybody in the room started to laugh.

What nobody could see were the tears of joy that were lovingly washed away by a succession of "doggie kisses," assuring that they would always remain a secret between two new and soon to be very special friends.



Ellie

Acknowledgement



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