

THE COMPANION

Issue 50



50
Canine Companions

CELEBRATING

In 1975, our founder and a brave, young woman with a disability took a bold idea and began a journey that would change lives worldwide. What started with a single service dog has become something far greater than anyone could have imagined. Because of our dedicated community's support, time and belief in our mission, thousands of people with disabilities have found independence, confidence and peace of mind.

Canine Companions has grown from humble beginnings to become the service dog industry leader – the journey is far from over.

We look forward with hope and purpose as we celebrate our 50th anniversary. The next 50 years require more to meet a growing need – more innovation, more resources, more service dogs, more access and more lives changed.



INDEPENDENCE

As always, you, our community, are crucial to making success possible in the future. Whether you've been part of our community for decades or are picking up this magazine for the first time, you are part of the Canine Companions family. And we value and need you.

Looking to the future together, we strive to achieve that every qualified child, adult and veteran who could benefit from a service dog receives one. Together, we can raise more puppies, support more volunteers, grow our support and reach more communities nationwide.

If you're a volunteer, donor, graduate, supporter or staff member, you're the reason we're here. If you're new to our mission, we welcome you to join our family and understand the impact of our work.

Thank you for making a difference — past, present and future. Together we will make the next 50 years extraordinary.

With gratitude,



Paige Mazzoni
Chief Executive Officer




John Sabo
National Board Chair

Look for us! We're coming to your neighborhood soon!



Together
we dream
bigger

canine.org



Together
we are
unstoppable



TRAILBLAZING HELP *from Abdul*



In 1975, Gerald Ford was president, the Vietnam War ended, “Jaws” was the #1 movie, and the Cincinnati Reds won the World Series. It was also when people with disabilities gained a new tool in life-changing independence through Kerry and Abdul, the first Canine Companions service dog team.

Kerry was working at the Sonoma Development Center when a call came in asking to speak to the CEO about a novel idea—partnering to train dogs that would help people with physical disabilities. Unbeknownst to the caller, Kerry had congenital muscular dystrophy and volunteered immediately to partner in training the world’s first service dog.

She had visions of an entirely different life than she was living—of going to the mall and having a dog pay for her items, opening doors in public places, ensuring she could do anything and no longer needed to ask for help.

In an early Canine Companions publication, Kerry wrote, “I used to feel that being physically unable to do things made me somehow inadequate. With Abdul, I realized I needed to find other ways of accomplishing those things. Abdul is one of those ways.”

Thanks to Abdul, whose name is derived from “to serve” in Arabic, Kerry’s vision came to fruition and her life was changed forever.

Soon, Kerry joined the staff of Canine Companions, helping others partner with their own service dogs to increase their independence.

Kerry had the help of three life-changing service dogs, Abdul, Petunia and Nancy, before she passed away in 2020. We’re grateful Kerry took a chance to better her independence, helping thousands of service dog users that followed.



Kerry and her service dog meet actress Jane Seymour.





Sunny Days With Sunday

Of all the abilities dogs from Canine Companions possess, who would guess helping children improve their reading skills is one? But that's precisely what a therapy dog named Sunday is doing in Carlsbad, California.

In 2022, therapy dog handler Kristen approached Aviara Oaks Elementary School in the north San Diego County community with a proposal: Sunday could join students one day a week in the library for focused reading sessions. And so, the Canine Corner Reading Club was born.

With the nickname Sunni – fitting for the ray of light she brings to Aviara Oaks' first, second and third graders – participating students read aloud as Sunday provides a calming presence and emotional support. Sunday is also a motivator.

"It is just so cool to see kids who had reading challenges, after they come into the program, excitedly say, 'Can I read first today?'" Kristen says. "Sunday's role is just to lie there, be quiet, be hugged and give the children kisses. And it works like magic."

Aviara Oaks is benefiting from a unique tool to further the development of lifelong readers. Kristen agrees. "I take joy from knowing Sunday is helping students with a skill they will use forever."

THERAPY DOG PROGRAM

First

therapy dog team
placed in 2019

392

working therapy dog teams
through May, 2025

121

therapy dog
evaluators

30 Years of Puppies at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility

In 1995, an innovative partnership began at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville, Oregon — one that would go on to change the lives of hundreds through the power of a puppy.

Coffee Creek was the first prison to partner with Canine Companions, welcoming the very first puppies into the facility 30 years ago. Since then, incarcerated women at Coffee Creek have helped raise more than 220 future service dogs, transforming not only the lives of people with disabilities but also their own.



“Being a part of the Coffee Creek puppy program changed me forever,” says former handler Heidi Stoner. “After years of abuse and addiction, this was the first step in my journey of healing and personal growth. I wouldn’t be where I am today without this incredible program.”

Volunteer puppy raiser Heather Ohmart has been training handlers and co-raising puppies at the facility for over 18 years. “The handlers at Coffee Creek feel very isolated in prison, and this gives them a connection to their community,” she says. “They’re going to be released someday, and we want them to come home as productive members of society. This program helps them do that.”

Prison puppy raising programs reduce recidivism and improve service dog graduation rates — a win-win for everyone involved. Today, we’re proud to operate 22 prison puppy raising programs nationwide, including nine new programs in 2024. We are deeply grateful to Coffee Creek for being the very first.

20 YEARS AT GADSDEN PRISON

Canine Companions is proud to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its prison puppy raising program at Florida’s Gadsden Correctional Facility — a partnership that has transformed lives for both people and puppies more than 285 times.

The program’s impact on the women in the facility is powerful. With a recidivism rate under 5%, participants gain leadership, communication skills and a renewed sense of purpose.

As one handler, Ashleigh shared, “This program is so much bigger than us. When I joined this team, I was broken. Now, I am full of life, confidence, and joy.”

As the Gadsden program celebrates this milestone, Canine Companions honors the dedication, compassion and transformation made possible by this extraordinary partnership.

Canine Companions on ABC World News Tonight

Canine Companions and San Quentin Rehabilitation Center in California celebrated their puppy raising program with a heartwarming reunion featured by ABC World News Tonight and the Associated Press. Clients Ben and Robert met the handlers who raised their service dogs, Artemis and Wendel. The event generated 550+ media stories, reaching over 715 million people.





A Legacy of Giving for
DECADES

Sometimes, a single moment can spark a lifetime of impact.

For Anne Gittinger, that moment came when the cover of a 1980 Life Magazine caught her attention: A boy and his Canine Companions service dog were in the shower, the dog waiting to assist if needed. "I was so impressed with the dogs," Anne says. "I immediately sent \$10, and I've been doing that — multiplied just a little bit — ever since," she jokes. That modest gift led to decades of support.

She says, "It's the greatest joy of my life to be able to help with Canine Companions and it satisfies so much of my passion for helping people."

We are grateful for all Anne has given in wisdom and in gifts to help our mission flourish.

A few years later, in 1985, Charles M "Sparky" Schulz, of Peanuts® fame, told his wife, Jean, about a service dog he met, sparking a lifelong connection.

"We recognized that the organization needed support," Jean recalls. "I joined the Canine Companions board of directors 39 years ago. While the dogs drew us in, the people are the most meaningful part of Canine Companions."

We're grateful to have had the Schulz's dedicated support, from early financial gifts to the recent creation of our animated short film, "Andy: A Dog's Tale."

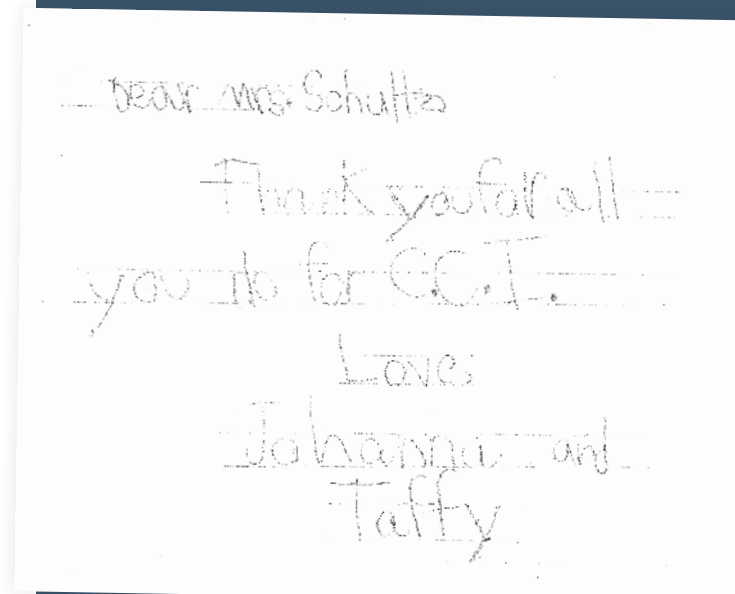
"I'm proud to have the Schulz name associated with an organization that does so much good. And, I know Sparky would be proud of how far we've come — and where we're going."

Today, Anne and Jean are members of the Empower Independence Society's Hero Society as donors who have supported Canine Companions with cumulative or annual giving of over \$1 million.

We're truly grateful to Anne, Jean, Sparky and all our foundational supporters who have made our mission possible from the earliest years.



Long-time client Johanna Benthal, now age 28, sent Jean Schulz a hand-drawn thank you note when she was placed with her first service dog, Taffy, as a child.



*Dear Mrs. Schulz
Thank you for all you do for C.C.I.
Love,
Johanna and Taffy*

"We sponsor Canine Companions puppies in memory of Autumn III, the first Canine Companions puppy we raised. She was full of empathy, love and spirit. To date, we've sponsored seven puppies in her honor—supporting the Sponsor a Puppy program as a way to celebrate her legacy and the impact of these incredible dogs."

— **Susan and Richard**,
Lakewood, CO, seven-time
puppy sponsors

"Supporting Canine Companions is probably the most rewarding thing we have ever done. While graduates were so very proud and happy to have their new Canine Companions dog change their lives, it affected us too. We've been rewarded 50 times over what we've ever given."

— **Dan and Ginny**, Indianapolis, IN, donors since 1989

"Looking back on our first gift in 1995, Canine Companions has become one of the longest-standing partnerships at The Sharon D. Lund Foundation. There's something magical in the bond between a service dog and a human. This work is love in action, and life-changing for the freedom it provides. If you can, visit the campus and give yourself the gift of meeting this extraordinary team and learning more about all they do. And if you are lucky enough to attend a graduation, make sure to bring tissues!"

— **Karen Presley**, Vice-President,
Grants & Community Relations
The Sharon D. Lund Foundation

The "Why" Behind the Donation



A LIFETIME OF INDEPENDENCE

Living with severe juvenile arthritis known as Still's Disease, Bari Schlesinger faced one significant challenge: reaching the charger each night for her essential power wheelchair.

In 1987, a Canine Companions service dog named Carol helped overcome this obstacle, showing Bari that life's possibilities were endless with a service dog's help.

Bari has had decades of independence with five empowering service dogs: Carol, Takai, Wickford, Axel and Anikan.

"Carol was the catalyst for me always asking myself, 'What else can I do?'" she recalls.

For the past nine years, Service Dog Anikan was profoundly life-changing for Bari. Anikan assisted with complex tasks, just like Carol had done so long ago; retrieving the charger for her wheelchair, grabbing items from the freezer, and grabbing her debit card from the ATM. Bari felt that Anikan intuitively knew what she needed, and his constant presence was empowering.

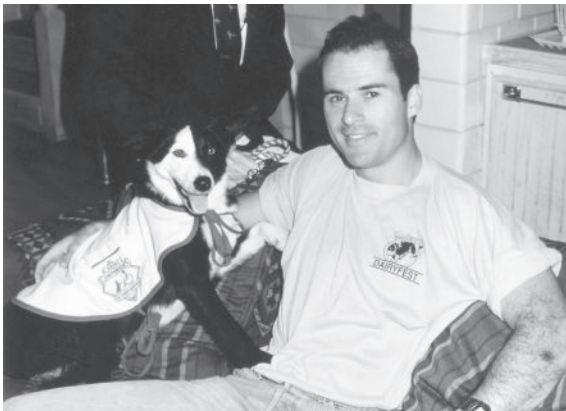
"I haven't been without a Canine Companions service dog for more than a few days since 1987," Bari says. "And those few days without Anikan were eye-opening. I felt like I was thrown back 30 years to life before I got Carol."

Just recently, Anikan "passed the leash" to Bari's sixth service dog, Jamal. Jamal is joining a legacy of expertly trained service dogs, ensuring that Bari always has a four-legged helper keeping her independent for years to come.



CHEERS TO 50 YEARS!

As the first organization to train service dogs for people with disabilities, we've had a lot of change, plentiful memories and opportunities to cherish over the years.



Hearing Dog Xyla on Guiding Light



Canine Companions hit the "Street" with service dog Muppet Brandeis



Together, Kerry and her trainer would teach a willing, sweet and motivated black Lab/Golden Retriever named Abdul 98 tasks to satisfy everything Kerry needed help with, allowing her to be truly independent.



Canine Companions was selected to walk in the 57th presidential inaugural parade in 2013.

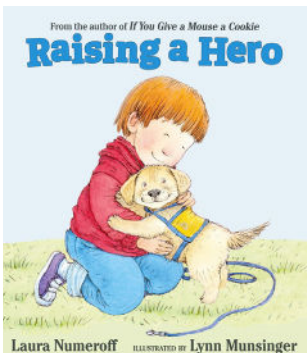
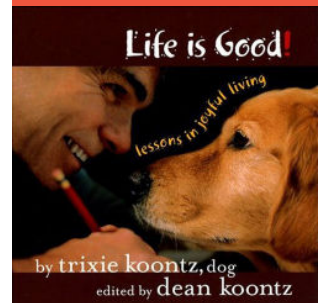


In the late 1990s, training staff worked on a project involving training chickens to respond to a training clicker.

Ellie, placed in 2004, was the first criminal justice facility dog.



In 2004, Dean Koontz, best-selling novelist and beloved Canine Companions supporter, helps his Canine Companions released dog Trixie pen her first novel, "Life is Good."



World-renowned children's author Laura Numeroff partnered to create "Raising a Hero" to honor a client and raise awareness of our mission. The book is available in most libraries!

"At the beginning, we had every type of dog; We had the Labs, Golden Retrievers and German Shepherds. We had Collies, Smooth Collies, Poodles and Welsh Corgis. There was a big Doberman and a Rottweiler. But eventually, we started using just the Corgis and then Labs for hearing dogs and Labradors and Golden Retrievers for service dogs."

Dr. Ruth Daniels, Veterinarian, 1982-2015

"I know where each region training center came from, the barns, the pig barns, the farmhouses — just one-room offices. From where we started to see all the bricks and mortar we have today — It's been an amazing journey. I'm just so humbled that I've been able to participate in an organization since its huge growth from back in the day."

Clark Pappas, Director Client Services, 37 Years



Our National Headquarters and Northwest Region Training Center moved to the Jean and Charles Schulz Campus in Santa Rosa, California, in 1996.

35 years of the ADA



Senator Harkin stops for a photo with clients and volunteers at a celebration of 25 years of the ADA.

In 1990, a pivotal piece of legislation that would change the lives of people with disabilities would be signed into law – the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA.

The federal bill required new accommodations that would not only make the world more accessible but also made it a federal law that task-trained service animals would be permitted in places where their handlers with disabilities were permitted.

Thanks to Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, Canine Companions was included in the passing of this important legislation. Senator Harkin's brother

was Deaf and knew the great work of hearing dogs provided by Canine Companions.

"The ADA transformed the landscape and culture of America," Senator Harkin says. "It's been transformative in so many lives."

Senator Harkin has celebrated ADA milestones with our clients multiple times since the law's passage.

It is thanks to legislator collaborations that Canine Companions educates, advocates and guides the creation of legislation to support the service dog community.

NATIONAL SERVICE DOG MONTH GET INVOLVED

September marks our fourth celebration of National Service Dog Awareness Month, and you can help celebrate! Join us by raising awareness of this important milestone in our 50th year, becoming an advocate, helping with educational outreach in the community, getting state and local proclamations and more! **Stay tuned for more information!**



Kiva Gives Me Purpose



Creating a full and meaningful life for Kiva gives Buddy purpose. One of his favorite ways to spend time with her is along the Pacific coastline in San Diego County, tossing a Frisbee and soaking in the sunshine.

Kiva, Buddy's third service dog, is more than a best friend. She's a trusted helper, assisting with daily tasks like retrieving items, opening doors or turning off lights — often with an intuitive sense that continues to impress him.

As a seasoned handler, Buddy enjoys mentoring fellow veterans at the VA and Paralyzed Veterans Association who are curious about service dogs.

"They had questions like, 'Could they really pick up my prosthetic leg and bring it to me? Could they really turn off the lights when I get in bed?'" he says. "It was nice to be able to give them solutions."

But the greatest gift Kiva brings isn't just her physical support — it's her presence.

"I didn't realize what an impact they could make just by filling the house with joy."

Having served in the United States Air Force, Buddy is no stranger to responsibility and purpose. That same sense of duty still shapes his days — now shared with his service dog, Kiva.

"She's a really great motivator," Buddy says. Living with quadriplegia, he credits Kiva with keeping him active and engaged. "She's expecting something to be happening all day until it's time to sleep."

For Buddy, that joy is deeply connected to purpose — something he's proud to share with Kiva each day.



2024 JACK WARNOCK *Award Winner*

Connie Van Schaick of Santa Rosa, CA has been a dedicated volunteer for Canine Companions for more than 25 years. She has been a multiple-time volunteer puppy raiser and breeder caretaker, all while working full time. Connie has raised 15 puppies and hosted dozens of litters in her home.

During Canine Companions' 50th anniversary this year, she will fittingly host her 50th litter of puppies. Now retired from her job, Connie has dedicated even more time to Canine Companions, as a passionate breeder caretaker and event volunteer.

"When I hear about how one dog has changed someone's life, and I realize that puppy was born in my home, it brings tears to my eyes to know they got their start with me," she reflects. "It's very rewarding to see what these dogs do to improve the lives of people with disabilities."

If being a busy breeder caretaker wasn't enough, she's also involved in the Canine Companions gala in Santa Rosa, procuring and organizing items for silent auctions for more than five years, helping raise more than \$2 million for our mission.

To honor and thank Connie for her outstanding volunteerism, the national board of directors recently awarded her the Jack Warnock Award, given to one extraordinary volunteer each year.

Read more about our regional volunteer award winners on [page 19](#).





Future Service Dogs Start Here

26-year-old Gianna Ahern is passionate about volunteering, loves dogs and has a background in caring for newborn and young puppies.

Gianna began volunteering with Canine Companions by fostering puppies overnight and dropping them off at the airport in the early morning to fly to meet their volunteer puppy raisers.

When she realized she wanted a puppy by her side for more than just a night, Gianna began raising her first Canine Companions puppy, Siena. When Siena was selected as a breeder dog, Gianna was excited to take on the role of her volunteer breeder caretaker. Gianna is also co-raising her second puppy, Bonita.

Gianna says, "Breeder caretakers, puppy raisers, professional trainers — everyone who has a role in a dog's life — help shape who that dog is, and I really love that."

Gianna impressively juggles her busy life as a breeder caretaker, puppy raiser and working full time. She shares, "My community of friends and family and the Canine Companions community offers so much support. That's what allows me to do this."

BREEDING PROGRAM HISTORY

The formal breeding program started in 1985

Lab/Golden Retrievers were bred as a primary service dog breed in 1988

160 breeder caretakers in 2025

Partners in Independence

In the 1960s, Paul Iams was inspired to create a new type of dog food that could help fuel dogs with jobs. He developed a state-of-the-art, high-protein formula that went against conventional wisdom at the time and placed dog performance and science first— he called it "Eukanuba."

This commitment to the science behind nutrition brought Canine Companions and Eukanuba together in 1991. For over 30 years, Canine Companions and Eukanuba have shared a commitment to giving our dogs what they need at every stage of life. Together, we've explored the connection between nutrition and the service dogs we raise and train. This important partnership also increases awareness of our

life-changing mission through media activity and in-store advertising.

The dedication and generous financial support of our longtime corporate partners, like Eukanuba, allow us to continue our cutting-edge research and training programs. Together, we're working towards an industry-wide goal of providing service dogs to all eligible applicants and reducing wait times for individuals who would benefit from them.

We're so grateful to Eukanuba for their decades of commitment to independence.

Eukanuba™





Serving in Virginia

In April, Canine Companions held a grand opening for its new property in Mathews, Virginia, an addition important to the organization's future growth. The Helen and Murray Main Foundation donated the 220-acre estate.

Virginia's historic Hampton Roads area is home to nearly two million people and is known for its large military presence and hundreds of historical sites and attractions.

"Canine Companions has over 400 volunteers to support in the Virginia area," says Chief Executive Officer Paige Mazzoni. "We've had the veterans initiative for decades, and this building will help serve even more volunteers and veterans closer to home."

REGIONAL VOLUNTEER AWARDS

We are pleased to announce the 2024 regional volunteer award winners. Each winner has shown exceptional volunteerism and we're grateful for their dedication and efforts towards our mission.

Read more about our winners at canine.org/warnock.

NORTH CENTRAL REGION

Jules Rudigier, Kansas

NORTHWEST REGION

Connie Van Schaick, California*

SOUTHEAST REGION

Ty Kirkpatrick, Florida

NORTHEAST REGION

Diane Fergenson, New York

SOUTH CENTRAL REGION

Judy Schumpert, Texas

SOUTHWEST REGION

Karen Sealander, Arizona

**2024 JACK WARNOCK AWARD WINNER*

Find events in your
area now!



2025 EVENTS



National Graduation Day	August 8
DogFest Houston	September 13 – Houston, TX
DogFest Long Island	September 13 – Massapequa, NY
DogFest Southwest	September 13 – Vista, CA
North Texas Giving Day	September 18 – Online
DogFest DFW	September 20 – Dallas, TX
Give a Dog a Job 5K	September 20 – Richmond, VA
DogFest North Central	September 21 – New Albany, OH
DogFest Seattle	September 25 – Seattle, WA
DogFest Washington, DC	October 4 – Reston Town Center, Reston, VA
DogFest OKC	October 5 – Oklahoma City, OK
DogFest Bay Area	October 18 – San Francisco, CA
Independence is Golden – Southeast Region	October 25 – Rosen Shingle Creek, Orlando, FL
Independence is Golden – Seattle	November 1 – Seattle, WA
Salute Independence	November 5 – Bayshore, NY
National Graduation Day	November 7
Valley of the Sun Golf Classic	November 17 – Chandler, AZ

A LIFELONG MISSION OF **SERVICE**



For Kim Doyle, a simple act of teenage volunteerism turned into a lifelong mission of service.

At 15 years old, Kim was forced to give up her dreams of competitive diving due to health issues. Searching for a new path, she stumbled upon Canine Companions — and everything changed. That’s when she met Judah, her very first future service dog.

Judah graduated as a service dog for Scott “Bubba” Pollock. Kim found that Judah had changed her life as much as he had changed Bubba’s. Kim and Bubba remained close until his unexpected passing in 2005, a loss that only deepened Kim’s dedication to the mission.

Kim continued to volunteer with her beloved released dog Yarnell through college. In 2013, she joined the organization as a new professional trainer. Today, she’s a senior instructor at the Northeast Region Training Center.

Whether teaching a dog to tug open a door or counseling a client after placement, Kim brings passion to every step.

Now, balancing her rewarding career with family life, Kim feels a deep sense of purpose. Her journey proves something powerful: when you join an organization like Canine Companions, you change lives — but you might also find your own calling.



**Looking for our 2025 Team
Training yearbook? Scan the QR code
to see our online yearbook now!**



PUPPY RAISING

Full Circle

Partnership with Service Dog Cozy has given Aubri her life back. But her journey with Canine Companions didn't start as a client — it began as a volunteer puppy raiser.

During undergrad at Texas Tech University, Aubri and her partner, Patrick, raised three puppies — Mikuni, Falen and Night.

As Aubri's disability progressed, she began losing her independence and could no longer keep up with raising puppies. Fortunately, she knew where to turn.

"Through raising puppies, I saw firsthand how much these dogs change lives," shares Aubri. "It became clear a service dog could help me, too."

She found her perfect match in Service Dog Cozy — right alongside Night, who was matched in the same class. Aubri crossed the graduation stage twice: once to pass Night's leash to his new partner, and again to receive Cozy's.

This full-circle moment was more than just symbolic. For Aubri, it marked the beginning of renewed independence, connection and confidence — "an experience that can hardly be described."



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South Central Region

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