Thinking About Getting a Service Dog? Here's Our Advice to You

Our family has spent our entire lives with dogs. From Cocker Spaniels to Dobermans to Pitbulls to Labradors of every color and size. We've trained each of these dogs ourselves and even received "professional" training, but only once. We've seen a lot, screwed up a lot, and learned a lot over those years. But the overwhelming need to give back became evident to us upon the advent of a horrific battle a close friend of ours endured and defeated. In the hospital's intensive care unit for 11 months, countless surgeries and too many close calls with death, we decided it was time to turn around this patient and get him fighting for his life himself.

When moved to a long-term rehabilitation facility, we were allowed to bring Nitro, the original Big Paws, our then 5 year old Yellow Block Head from Oakridge Labradors in Chino Calif (www.OakridgeLabradors.com). We soon realized the energy he brought with him into this not-so-positive environment. Nitro began visiting other patients and they began asking when he was coming by again. The nurses told us countless stories of the positive attitudes in these patients towards eating, dressing, showering and physical rehab after Nitro left. So we took an active role and made sure that the patients knew when we were coming back, but made sure they did what the nurses and doctors needed, before they saw Nitro.

We knew about the health benefits that dogs have on people (lower blood pressure, less anxiety, decreased heart rate just to name a few), but never had we witnessed such a turnaround in one's health first hand. And then came Diesel.

After a serious injury to his knee, Steve began to bond with Diesel, our then 2 year old Yellow Block head, again, from Oakridge Labradors. Not only would Diesel physically lie on top of Steve while he was in the recliner but he would constantly lick that injured knee.

Steve noticed that when Diesel crawled up on top of him, he would place his head on Steve's chest as if to hear his heart beat. Steve noticed that it was usually escalated due to pain or anxiety or stress over his injury, but after a few minutes of Diesel time, even his breathing would slow down.

It was then that we experienced the power of Puppy Breath and the incredible instinctual abilities of these dogs. As a Disabled Veteran and now a Former First Responder, we agreed that this was the way to give back to our community and society. In February 2012, we officially incorporated Big Paws Canine and began training and providing Service, Therapy and Companion Dogs to Disabled Veterans and Former First Responders injured in the Line of Duty.

There are a tremendous amount of things that we had no clue about when we started this journey, so we would like to share some things you may not have thought of either.

Since 2012, we have placed a Service Dog with a Recipient on average of once a month. We spend an incredible amount of time assessing the needs of the Recipient as well as the skills of the dog to ensure a best fit. We do trial runs in the home and sleep overs as well as daily training to prepare for the first few days after official adoption. But we still prepare for the first phone call a few hours after final drop off that we get the call telling us that he's broken, he stopped working. And we explain AGAIN, that you need to work and train with your dog everyday. EVERYDAY. For the rest of his life. And not just a walk around the block.

So, our first piece of advice to you is this. Know that when you get your service dog, assuming you get a "finished" dog, if you expect him to keep working, you need to work with him daily. We still do sit, stay, heel, down, etc. Everyday. We do basic training, we go to classes, we go to training sessions with groups, we constantly look for new scenarios that we can work through. It never ends. But that's the beauty of it. Those sessions help build a bond, and they keep the dog busy and entertained. And if training doesn't get done everyday, you just received a dog that will get bored and aggravate you and your family because it is looking to you to "play". That's what these dogs do best. Their attention and devotion on YOU is play to them. They want to please and be rewarded with praise and love.

As for other pets in the house? Well, let me let you in on another secret. That will create more work for you. You can't let the "pet" dogs mingle with the "working" dog. The working dog requires constant supervision to help him stay focused. When the working dog gets to play, it is still a very structured type of play, play with a purpose to it. There is no throwing them all out in the backyard and letting them back in 2 hours later. The working dog needs structure, needs to be on-place, needs to be focused. So here is something else you should consider. Even when you are sitting on your couch watching TV, one eye stays on the service dog. The dog is on-place (an area/mat/cot where the dog will down stay). Not roaming the halls or out in the yard sniffing daisies.

These dogs require some kind of attention constantly. Constantly. Constantly.

As a service dog, you get to bring them with you everywhere. How fun does that sound? They come to the grocery store, restaurants, Disneyland, school, work. Here is the next piece of advice. Some Service Dogs are trained to support the "invisible" disabilities. What that means is that no one can tell just by looking at you that you have an issue that a Service Dog could help alleviate. There is no wheelchair, no white cane, no oxygen tank, or chemo created bald head. Sure, there may be some minor signs of your disability, but for the most part, you can get in and out of places and no one will ever know you might have any disability. But walking a Service Dog through a Target? You might as well strap on a huge neon sign that says "look at me" while playing the bagpipes and bubbles are blown out your... well, you get the idea. So if you or your family are shy, or are uncomfortable as the center of attention, this may not be an ideal situation for you.

And while you are out in public with your dog, you will be finely tuned in to all that people say around you. Snide remarks, rude questions, stares, pointing fingers and people constantly trying to pet your dog will be the highlight of every trip out. It will require a much tougher skin

then perhaps you would think. The quick trip to the market won't be quick anymore. You will be stopped constantly with questions about what they do, or how long they are in training, or "I wish I could bring my dog". It's tough to filter out.

The amount of stuff we carry these days borders on ridiculous. Cell Phones, Tablets, Laptops, Blue Tooth, Water Bottles, I thought technology was going to free us, not make us dependent on it, and when did we get so dehydrated? Now, to travel with a dog, there is a backpack which has a place blanket, a drool towel, water bowl, water, poop bags, treats and treat bag, a reward toy, ball, etc. All these things are just as important.

These dogs also require more grooming than the prettiest poodle you've ever seen. If you will be taking your dog out, you don't want to take a dirty, stinky dog into a restaurant. You don't want to take a flea infested dog into a school or your office. That dog needs to be clean! And if it's a Lab, that's a tall task. They are like Pigpen. Just let them out for a second and they find dirt, mud, something to roll in, an algae infested pond, it doesn't take long. Our Labs, Nitro and Diesel, are like Pumbaa and Timon rolling in grubs and worms like in the movie The Lion King.

And a funny thing happens when you get involved in the Service Dog world. When you start following people on Facebook with dogs, who are bragging about how their dog did this, and how their dog did that, and how amazing their dog is, and you just want to know when will my dog be showcased on YouTube? It takes time to realize that these teams have been together a long time. They have experience, they have put in the work, they make every activity an opportunity for training or retraining. They also only talk about the good. They don't share how many times their dog messed in Target or got possessive with their favorite toy or didn't want to get out of the cool car on a hot day to get your groceries. What, no Puppy Food? OK, I'll be right here when you're done. Don't get resentful. Use it as inspiration. Work towards being an amazing team. But also know that they are missing stuff too, you just don't hear about it.

Add to all of this, dog hair EVERYWHERE, more vet care, expensive dog food, training sessions, gear like harnesses, leashes, crates, cots, etc, and these dogs are expensive to maintain.

So why? If they are so much work, why have one at all? Why would anyone want to do this?

Because one day, you're going to let your guard down. You're going to get so wrapped up in your day that you forget to take your meds, or worse yet, don't think you need them. That dog that you have built a bond with is going to notice and bug you until you remember. It may be to remind you to get outside and walk. It might be to cuddle to lessen your anxiety. It might be that quick trip to the store took longer than necessary because the crowds were too much for you to handle mentally and physically. Your buddy wasn't there to make a path for you or steady himself so that you could get up from that fall because the crowd was too close and you lost your balance.

And because not a day or 2 after that dog comes into your home, you realize that the dog provides SO much more than just an extra tool for your physical health. That dog becomes SO much more important to your mental health as well. That dog provides comfort, warmth,

friendship, companionship, love, a soft place to lay a weary head. A running buddy and fitness friend. The dog doesn't judge you. You can tell it your secrets.

So, my advice to you is to think hard before you decide to get a Service Dog. Know that this won't be easy. Know that regardless of how much you research, it will be 3x harder, maybe even 5x harder if you've never had a dog before. Is your life ready for one? Is your home ready for one? Is your family ready for one? Do you have the time and commitment to make this work? Because it is A LOT of work, and takes up more time than you think. With that hard work, the dog can become a valuable resource, and a beloved member of the family. Without it? The dog can become a very expensive elephant in the room, causing feelings of anxiety and resentment, which isn't fair to you OR the dog. You could potentially be taking a great working dog from someone who IS willing to put in the work, the time, the effort, and make an amazing team.

If you think you are ready for a Service Dog, please complete the Application and we will be in contact with you.

If you feel you are not ready yet, but still have questions, No Problem, call us and we'll walk you through it.

Steve & Mary Slavik, Co-Founders

Thank you to Frank & Laurie Wisneski, and especially Stella, Major & Raven, from Team BlackDogsRule.com for allowing Big Paws Canine to adapt their article on Diabetic Service Dogs for our needs with Disabled Veterans.