

## Event spotlights work of canine companions

### Two owners share their tales of how trained dogs have changed their lives

By BONNIE BURCH • Staff Writer • April 29, 2008



Jeff Adams of Huntsville, Ala., pats his Canine Companion Sharif at a breakfast on Thursday for the organization at Old Natchez Country Club in Franklin. Adams lost a leg during a roadside bomb explosion while serving in the military in Iraq.

(JEANNE REASONOVER / THE TENNESSEAN)

FRANKLIN — When Rhonda Clark accidentally dropped her checkbook under the table weeks ago, the Nashville resident only had to say, "Art, get!" and the book was back in her hand within seconds.

Jeffrey Adams, an Army first lieutenant who lost 96 percent of his left leg to a roadside bomb while serving a tour of duty in Iraq, has received some help opening doors and flipping light switches while he gets used to walking with a prosthetic leg.

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Both individuals are living a more comfortable life after receiving assistance dogs two months ago from Canine Companions for Independence. The two were on hand to share their stories of gratitude last week before the CCI's southeastern region informational breakfast for volunteers, staff and donors at the Old Natchez Country Club.

Clark, who uses a wheelchair because of cerebral palsy, brings her service dog, Art II, to her clerical job at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital. He naps under her desk until she needs assistance in a task. Recently, Clark almost slipped out of her wheelchair when she was getting in, but Art immediately sensed the danger. Before she could take a tumble, Art threw his body in front of the chair, keeping her steady.

"He's only been with me for two months, but I can tell he loves me unconditionally. This is my first dog and I don't know how I lived independently all these years without him," Clark said. In addition to picking up dropped items, Adams' canine companion, Sharif, also has a public relations job.

"When I would go to the mall, people used to stare at my leg. Now they stare at my dog. Kids feel free to come up to Sharif. It makes me more approachable when I'm out in public," said Adams, the first Iraq war veteran to receive a dog in the CCI program.

Dogs serve many roles

Founded in 1975, the national Canine Companions for Independence is headquartered in Santa Rosa, Calif. The organization trains assistance dogs for four different uses. Clark and Adams are a part of the service team where the animals perform certain physical tasks. Hearing dogs are given to the deaf or the hard of hearing and are trained to react to sounds such as smoke alarms, alarm clocks and telephone rings.

Other dogs serve in caregiver or educational facilities while another group provides social and communication interaction with adults and children with disabilities in skilled companion teams.

Almost all the dogs in the program come from the group's selective breeding program. They are golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers or a cross between those two breeds.

"We look for dogs that are calm, with a mild temperament. These breeds also tend to be very motivated to learn commands," said Cathy Rodgers, CCI development director.

Not all dogs that start out in the program as puppies make it all the way to the end of graduation. They must go through a stringent training process, where they'll learn more than 40 commands.

The human component of the team, who also go through a rigorous application process, must have their own training and learn how to take care of their new canine companions including bathing, feeding schedules and more.

For more information about volunteering or donating to CCI, or if you are or know someone who could benefit from the program, visit <http://caninecompanions.org>.

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