



Freedom is an abstract idea for many people, but for Andrea Abel it is a living, breathing, loving animal with a wet nose and soulful eyes – her faithful service dog, Rossie.

Andrea, 34, has muscular dystrophy and is confined to a wheelchair, but her devoted Golden Retriever/Labrador mix frees her to work part-time at AAA in Heathrow. Just one of his remarkable talents is opening AAA's handicapped access door with his nose so Andrea can enter the building. With Rossie at her side, Andrea can go out shopping and to the movies.

"My favorite thing is when we come out of the movie and people will say, 'Wow, we didn't know there was a dog in here!'" says Andrea. "That's because he's so quiet."

Rossie is also the ultimate ice breaker. Adults and children are drawn to the dog, which is fine as long as they ask Andrea's permission before petting the dog, so she can place him in a sit position.

"When I'm in public, Rossie takes the focus off of my disability and puts it on him, which is a very positive thing," says Andrea.

At home in Heathrow, Rossie performs countless household tasks for Andrea such as opening drawers and doors, fetching the TV remote, and picking up dropped keys.

This fabulous gift of freedom comes from Canine Companions for Independence, a nonprofit with a regional office in Orlando that provides service dogs to the handicapped. It costs \$45,000 to train each dog, but the dogs are given to people who need them free of charge. The difference each dog makes in its owner's life is priceless.

"Rossie is great," says Andrea. "He's so amazing. I knew when I looked into the program at CCI how much the dogs help their owners. But I was amazed at the companionship they provide. With Rossie it feels like someone has my back, like he's always looking out for me."

One time Andrea was outside her house and her wheelchair stopped working. She commanded Rossie to bark for help. And he did until a family member came.

"With Rossie I never feel alone," she says. "He's there with me. It's nice to have Rossie always come in and save the day."

Andrea and Rossie have been together for two years. Her previous canine companion, Johnny, passed away in February after 11 years together. It was a heartbreaking loss. She keeps a photo of Johnny on a table in her living room.

"Losing Johnny was really difficult," says Andrea, who lives with her mom Carolyn and stepfather Patrick Russo. "But I had Rossie by then to help with the transition."

Andrea is one of more than 300 people in the Southeast who have received dogs from CCI since the California-based organization opened a regional Canine Companions for Independence Center in Orlando in 2000.

CCI Orlando is helped in its mission by puppy raiser volunteers who train and socialize the dogs during their first year-and-a-half, and then send them off for advanced training in California.

Andrea can't get over the way in which the volunteers devote themselves to their furry foster pups.

"I'm so moved by how selfless the puppy raisers are," says Andrea, who was given a scrapbook of photos from Rossie's puppy raisers so she wouldn't miss out on his milestones during his first year with them in

Jacksonville. "They raise the dog and incur all the expenses and go through all the puppy training and housebreaking," she points out. "Then they just give him to someone like me. I can never thank them enough.

Local puppy raisers Cathy and Marty Fischer of Sanford say there is no thanks necessary. The dogs and the people they help bring great joy to their lives.

"For us it's very rewarding," says Cathy, who is senior director of merchandise and licensing for Universal Parks and Resorts in Orlando. "We're dog people, so it was an easy decision to do this because we knew we were going to change someone's life for the better."

Marty says they got involved six years ago after her boss at Universal invited them to sit at the Universal Orlando table at a CCI gala, one of four held each year.

"When we walked in and saw all these Labrador retrievers sitting at attention, it was just awesome," he says.

But that was only the beginning.

"There was a couple from Tennessee and their autistic son who had a dog," says Marty. "He had never said a word until he got his dog and that night, being from Nashville, he wanted to sing his favorite Kenny Chesney song. Now his mom says, 'I can't get him to be quiet.' So the dog just opened him up. We couldn't get over it."

During the first half of each ceremony, puppy raisers turn in their dogs for advanced training. During the second half of the gala, dogs that have graduated and returned from California are given to their new owners.

Only one out of four dogs who goes for training is good enough to graduate. If a dog makes it all the way, the dog's original puppy raiser hands the leash over to the new owner.

"It's very emotional," says Marty. "I was just amazed. At some point my wife just said, 'We need to be puppy raisers.'"

Puppy raisers get their dog when it is eight weeks old, raise it up to 18 months and teach it 25 commands. They provide food, take it to the veterinarian for all its shots, and socialize it to be around other people and animals.

When the dog is six months old, it is allowed to go out with his CCI cape on in public to grocery stores, [restaurants](#) and the mall. Trainers want them to be comfortable in a lot of different environments.

Cathy and Marty are currently working with a pup named Henny.

"Part of the socialization process is to get them to a point where they are not fearful in public," says Cathy. "Henny puts her cape on and goes to work with me two to three days a week. Everyone at Universal has been very supportive of the program."

After more than a year together, it's difficult to turn a dog in for advanced training and send them off to California. Soon after receiving Henny, the Fischers sent their third puppy, Maureen, off to canine college. "I really get attached," says Cathy, who has two other dogs Aislin and Taryn. "Each one becomes like my little buddy. Then we get a new puppy about two weeks before the other leaves. It puts it in focus for us. We've got one that's going off to college and we've got a new puppy at home that needs our care and attention."

If a dog doesn't successfully graduate, puppy raisers get first choice if they want the dog back as a pet. Or the dog can be adopted by someone else for \$500.

If you want to help CCI, but don't think you could handle the demanding job of puppy raiser, the organization also needs volunteers in other areas and is always looking for donations of dog products and money. For more information visit their website: www.cci.org.

As the site says, you'll be helping someone to live "life. Unleashed."

Says Marty: "It's just amazing what these dogs do for people."

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