

# Canine companion

## Assistance dog changes Huntersville quadriplegic's life

BY SAM BOYKIN

Doctors call it a C6 cervical spinal cord injury. For Andy Arnette, it means he can't feel or move anything below his chest. Arnette, 43, has been using a wheelchair for nearly half his life. A quadriplegic.

But Arnette is much more than that. He's also a father, husband, business executive, activist, volunteer and coach. Arnette credits his family, friends and own fighting spirit for helping him achieve so much. And now, recently added to his support system is Solis, a 2-year-old Labrador retriever from [Canine Companions for Independence](#).

This past August, after completing a two-week training program in Orlando, FL, where he learned to work with and benefit from an assistance dog, Arnette returned home to Huntersville with Solis. "Even after just a few months, he's picking up on my habits," Arnette says.

While assistance dogs for the blind are familiar to most, the nonprofit Canine Companions breeds, trains and provides dogs like Solis for people with disabilities other than blindness, including the hearing impaired and those who need mobility assistance due to cerebral palsy, arthritis or, in Arnette's case, a spinal cord injury. Arnette says Solis helps him lead a more independent life by assisting with everyday tasks like retrieving dropped items and opening doors. "He just wants to please," says Arnette. "Anything that gets him a pat on the head."

### A fateful encounter

Arnette's story begins with a tragic incident on a summer evening in 1986. Arnette, 20 at the time, was on his way home when he ran into a friend who'd been a few years ahead of him in high school and with whom he had briefly worked with at a metal manufacturing

plant. The two hadn't seen each other in several months, and decided to go to the local pool hall and have a beer. There wasn't much else to do in Loris, a small South Carolina town near North Myrtle Beach.

After downing a few cold ones, Arnette says, they both drove to the high school football field, a popular hangout, and parked their cars next to one another. After about 10 minutes, Arnette started his car to leave. As he turned his head to say goodbye, Arnette was shocked to see his friend, still sitting in his own car, pointing a .44-caliber gun straight at his head. "I was looking right dead at him when the fire came out of the end of the gun," Arnette says. The slug pierced the left side of Arnette's neck and ripped through his spinal cord. Arnette was paralyzed instantly.

Arnette says he still has no idea why the friend pulled a gun on him. He believes the friend was probably just fooling around, trying to scare him, when he fired accidentally. South Carolina court records show Michael Tyler was convicted and sentenced to eight years in prison in Arnette's case. Records show Tyler was pardoned in 2001, meaning he had his rights restored.

With Arnette bleeding but still conscious, his friend slid him over to the passenger seat, got behind the wheel and took off to the hospital. Arnette was transported to Florence, S.C., where he underwent emergency surgery. "I woke up strapped to this bed," he says. "I couldn't feel anything from the chest down."

Things got worse. Arnette's wife left him soon after he was shot, taking their son with her. After spending nearly four months in physical therapy, Arnette



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moved to Mooresville to live with his mother.

Arnette hasn't seen or heard from Tyler since the day he was shot. "He's never said he was sorry, never even contacted me. Many nights I stayed awake thinking I should call him and let him know I'm doing a lot better than he probably thinks I am. But I got over that. I've moved on."

**Starting over**

For years after the shooting, Arnette wrestled with depression. But with the support of friends and family, he started to feel hopeful about the future. He eventually regained partial use of his arms, and is able to drive. In 1989 he enrolled in Goodwill Industries' computer training program and landed a job with Royal Insurance in Charlotte, where he met the woman who would become his second wife. "She's been my rock and inspiration," Arnette says of Cheryl. They married in 2001.

In 1997, Arnette went to work for Bank of America, where today he is a business support manager. He is also a founding member of the bank's Disability Affin-

ity Group, which provides resources to employees with disabilities as well as their families and friends.

Arnette joined the Adaptive Sports and Adventures Program, a Charlotte organization that uses athletics and outdoor activities to help those who are physically challenged. While coaching a soccer team, Arnette met a boy with cerebral palsy who had a dog from Canine Companions for Independence. Intrigued, Arnette contacted the organization.

There's a lengthy waiting list to be matched with a canine companion, but Arnette and Cheryl, along with eight other families, were finally invited down to the program's Southeast Regional Center in Orlando, FL. During a two-week team-training program, Arnette learned all of Solis's commands and how to care for him.

After an official graduation ceremony – "there were dogs and tears everywhere," Cheryl says – they loaded Solis in their van and drove home to Huntersville.

Solis is now with Arnette night and day, riding alongside him in his van dur-

ing trips to the store, on a recent outing to Mickey and Mooch restaurant, and even when Arnette was a judge at the annual Miss North Meck Competition. Arnette has taught Solis to pickup his laptop whenever it falls under the backseat of his van, something Arnette could never do on his own. Solis also provides social support. "He gets me out of the house more," Arnette says.

Solis also helps out around the house. He closes doors using a short rope or "tug" attached to the knob. Prior to Solis, if Arnette dropped something on the floor – most likely his phone – it would stay there until Cheryl got home. Or, Arnette would get a coat hanger and try to fish it off the floor – which could be a real issue in an emergency. Now, if Arnette drops the phone, Solis retrieves it.

"Before Solis, I didn't realize how much I needed him. He's helped me be more active and productive, and my wife is more at ease when I'm by myself now," Arnette says. "He's really made a difference in our lives."

**For more info:** [www.cci.org](http://www.cci.org) | **LN**



Solis can help Arnette retrieve dropped items.



Andy Amette with his assistance dog Solis