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## Mid-Month Musings October 2009



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The Mid-Month Musings will hopefully inform, inspire and spark discussion about many topics. Please also read our monthly newsletter for a wide variety of practical articles and information.

### **"Musing" (noun) - a calm, lengthy, intent consideration**

Unlike our first Tuesday e-newsletter, this monthly essay will not focus on practical legal cases and planning issues. The "Mid-Month Musings" will hopefully inform, inspire and provoke thought about many topics.

We hope you enjoy it - and let us know what you think!

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### "SHE CENTERS HIM"

Sounds like a chapter title in a romantic novel, doesn't it? Brings to mind the deeply affectionate admission made by Tom Cruise to Renee Zellweger in the movie Jerry McGuire: "You complete me." When I last heard the statement, it was made by a happy, tearful mother about her teenage son with autism and a beautiful young female of an entirely different species. His encounter, described below, is one that can be life-changing for other young people like him. However, some background is in order.

In October 2007, my daughter Melanie received a call from the Applicant Program Manager with [Canine Companions for Independence](#) (CCI) in Orlando, Florida. She had applied earlier with CCI to get a wheelchair assistance service dog, and they told her it was time to come to Orlando to get her dog. We had learned a great deal about therapy dogs and



personal assistance dogs since she had filed her application. In 2006, I completed the process of getting my 94-pound Golden Retriever, Gus, (at left) designated as a Certified Therapy Dog. A therapy dog is not a personal assistance dog, but is suited by temperament and obedience training to interact with children and adults with disabilities to share love and affection. A therapy

dog can go to facilities by invitation or permission only, while a service dog can legally go anywhere the assisted person goes, including public transportation, restaurants, etc. And while a personal service dog is not to be petted while working with the assisted person, getting petted whenever and wherever by whoever is the job title of the therapy dog.

There are two types of personal assistance dogs - the skilled companion dog and the skilled service dog. A skilled service dog is handled by the person with a disability, while a skilled companion dog is handled by a third person (parent or spouse) for the benefit and assistance of a person with a disability that prevents him or her from personally being able to

handle the dog. CCI determined through their application process that Melanie was physically, cognitively and verbally able to handle a skilled service dog, so in November 2007 she, Ruthie and I headed to Orlando for a two-week stay on the CCI Southeast campus. CCI is the oldest national service dog training and placement organization in the U.S., and aside from the cost of our transportation and meals, there has never been any charge for the training or the amazing little 3-year-old black Labrador Retriever, Madine, who now lives with Melanie as her constant companion and helper. She is so highly trained (with 42 commands) that I have commented to others that, if Gus has college-equivalent training, Madine has a Ph.D.

At CCI, we met Kyle and his parents, Tony and Jean. He was a pleasant but shy 14-year-old with autism that would often cause him to wander about, become distracted and move from one place or activity to another. During the two weeks, Melanie - and Kyle and his parents - worked with a number of the 16 dogs that were ready to be placed with them and the other nine adults and children who had applied and been included in this placement class. (Eventually, Melanie and three other adults received



skilled service dogs while Kyle and six others received skilled companion dogs.) By the end of the first week, each person had been paired with the dog that would become theirs. The second week involved much work to acclimate dogs to their new handlers, including trips to restaurants and stores of all types. During the training center practice sessions, we observed a

special bond develop between Kyle with his new companion (see photo). While others practiced heeling and having their dogs open and close doors and cabinets, Kyle would sit calmly with Myra, a beautiful yellow Lab/Golden Retriever cross with bright, dark eyes. He would stroke her and examine her all over, and she responded by laying against him and giving him affectionate licks when he got close to her face. A vest was fitted for her with a rigid upright handle that Kyle could hold while his parents, as handlers, walked on her other side holding the leash for control. In this manner, the family (now including their four-legged adoptee) cruised the malls and shops of Orlando together. Tony reports that Myra and Kyle remain an inseparable duo two years after.

At the end of the two week "team training" class, the CCI staff did video interviews with each new owner and family about their expectations of life with their new helpers. One of the most moving (but unsurprising) revelations was the statement by Kyle's mom, Jean. She said that they had not been able to go out in the community as a family because Kyle was not ever really "with them." But, she said as tears welled in her and her husband's eyes, "We see that we can now go out as a family because when Myra is with us, Kyle is with us. She centers him."

As I listened, I smiled through my own tears at the thought that a family's frayed life has been stitched together by a dog.

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P.S. I had the privilege of making a presentation in October 2009 for Stetson University Law School on using special needs trusts to provide the benefits of skilled assistance dogs for persons with disabilities. If you would like a copy of the presentation paper, you may download it from the Articles page of my website:

[www.elderlawms.com](http://www.elderlawms.com)

You can also see Gus on the Staff page of that site.

Our goal is to help you chart a course for personal and family financial and health care security. Please let us know if we can help you in any way.

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