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Man's best friend offers hope and smiles for Athens resident Shane Mitchell and his mother Deborah



Shane Mitchell of Athens, his mother Deborah and their new pal, Gator II, recently completed a two-week training course and assistance from Canine Companions Independence, a non-profit organization that breeds, trains and places assistance dogs for people with disabilities. Courtesy Photo

(<http://enewscourier.com/features/x935813338/Man-s-best-friend-offers-hope-and-smiles-for-Athens-resident-Shane-Mitchell-and-his-mother-Deborah>)

CNHI (<http://enewscourier.com>)

ATHENS — Athens resident Shane Mitchell, along with his mother, Deborah, recently graduated from two weeks of training and received an assistance dog from Canine Companions for Independence, a non-profit organization that breeds, trains, and places assistance dogs for people with disabilities.

Mitchell was matched with a Skilled Companion dog named Gator II, a 2-year-old yellow Golden/Labrador Retriever mix, who responds to more than 50 commands.

Gator will assist Mitchell, who has Friedreich's Ataxia, a rare genetic disease that affects a body's muscle and heart, by opening doors, retrieving dropped items, and other tasks that will enable him to lead a more independent life.

In addition to helping him with physical tasks, Gator will offer emotional support and daily companionship.

CCI dogs also serve as a social bridge for people who are not used to relating to a person with a disability. Mitchell enjoys watching Auburn University football games and is involved with his church.

The Mitchells graduated in May after completing Team Training, a rigorous training session at CCI's Southeast Regional Center in Orlando, Fla.

During Team Training, they learned all of Gator's commands and how to properly care for him.

Team Training is an essential part of CCI's program because it gives the recipient an

opportunity to learn how to work with and benefit from an assistance dog.

The process consists of daily lectures, exams, practice, and public outings. The Mitchells received an Assistance Dogs International (ADI) certification check-up by CCI trainers in September and are now allowed to take Gator into public places.

CCI assistance dogs are provided free of charge, though costs to CCI exceed \$45,000 to breed, raise, train and provide ongoing support.

Charitable contributions, grants, special events, and corporate support fund the substantial costs involved with this process.

CCI has its own breeding program in Santa Rosa, Calif.

When the puppies are eight-weeks old they are placed with volunteer puppy raisers across the country who will teach them up to 30 basic commands.

When the puppy is 14-16 months old the puppy raiser returns the dog to one of CCI's regional training centers for six months of advanced training.

Canine Companions for Independence is a non-profit organization that enhances the lives of people with disabilities by providing highly trained assistance dogs and ongoing support to ensure quality partnerships.

It is the largest non-profit organization in the world that provides assistance dogs for people with disabilities.

The Southeast Region of Canine Companions for Independence serves Florida, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana and Mississippi.

For more information about CCI contact the Southeast Regional Center at 800-572-BARK, or visit www.cci.org.