



Photos by Christine O'Connor

Jova plays catch with Brittany Specker as part of the girls' physical therapy. Jova is Brittany's new guide dog from Canine Companions for Independence, an Orlando based company.

Four-legged companion offers aid, friendship

By Christine O'Connor
Navarre Press

Waiting anxiously, Jova watched as his owner extended her arms above her head, a limp stuffed animal in her hands.

With the help of her physical therapist, Brittany Specker, 17, hurled the toy to the eagerly awaiting dog.

The game continued for a few more minutes until Specker, who was sitting with her legs bent to her right side, had to change her position, thus stretching out her hip rotators.

Specker uses her new friend, Jova, a 2-year-old black Labrador retriever, as part of therapy designed to strengthen her muscles that otherwise wouldn't be used.

"She was born at 24 weeks with cerebral palsy," said Donny Specker, Brittany's mom.

An unknown infection caused Donny to go into premature labor.

"The doctors tried to stop it but it only lasted for a day," she said. "Brittany was in the neonatal intensive care unit for six months. She was only one pound, 10 ounces."

Brittany's retinas were detached and she had to undergo surgery to close a patent ductus arteriosus – an opening that allows blood to flow from the heart into the lungs – to alleviate one of two heart mur-

urs. The other was fixed with medication.

The prognosis wasn't promising. "They told us about three different times she was going to die," Donny said. "They said if she lived, she probably wouldn't walk or talk."

But Brittany, a student at Navarre High School, has defied all odds.

"She's a praying miracle that she's here," Donny said.

Aside from getting around using a walker, Brittany speaks nearly perfect English, responds appropriately when spoken to and interacts physically to the best of her ability.

And now, with the help of Jova, a guide dog from Canine Companions for Independence, Brittany's future is looking even brighter.

"She opens the refrigerator and doors," Donny said. "And when Brittany is walking or if she drops something while in her wheelchair, Jova picks it up for her."

Donny and Brittany graduated from a two-week course offered by the Orlando-based organization on Nov. 15, allowing them to take Jova home. The two were trained as a team and Brittany can't take Jova out without her mother towing the leash.

"Brittany is legally blind and can only see things when they're close up," Donny said. "So out of safety for the dog, she's in the

wheelchair, she could run over (Jova's) paws."

The Speckers discovered Canine Companions for Independence, a nonprofit organization, while watching a T.V. show on the Animal Planet. An autistic student was using a dog to get around the classroom.

Eager to learn more, the Speckers searched the internet and, after researching, found that Brittany was a prospective beneficiary of the organization's mission.

"We had to have (affidavits) from the doctor and therapist," Donny said.

The organization provides highly trained assistance dogs to people with disabilities and ongoing support to ensure the relationship between the dog and owner are doing fine. The dogs are raised in homes with caretakers who are aware of the animal's destiny.

Once the dog reaches a certain age, it undergoes eight months of training and later is given free of charge to a person who needs help.

"It's good," Brittany said of her new friend.

"Jova is more than an aide, she's a companion," Donny said. "They sit together and play together."

For more information on Canine Companions for Independence, go to the Web site, www.caninecompanions.org.