

# Assistance Dogs Bring Help and Comfort to Physically Challenged

Photos courtesy of Canine Companions for Independence

 By Jason McKinney

**P**hlox knows how to switch lights on and off, open doors and pick up dropped objects. She is also a ball girl for tennis player Brent Baribeau and is going to be the ring bearer at his upcoming wedding. Oh, and did I mention that Phlox is a Black Labrador/Golden Retriever mix?

Phlox is one of the countless dogs who has been trained by Canine Companions for Independence, a non-profit foundation that has been around since 1975. With multiple regional training centers around the country, CCI is recognized worldwide for its training of canine helpers. There are currently more than 1,200 canine helpers nationwide, with more than 2,500 having gone through the program since its inception.

In spite of the fact that he uses a wheelchair because of a spinal injury, Westminster resident Brent plays tennis, skis and scuba dives, all thanks to Phlox, who knows up to 50 different commands. Prior to meeting Phlox, Brent took the free two-week Team Training course that CCI offers at its Oceanside, CA location.

During this course, an individual is matched with a dog and shown how to work together. Prior to this, though, each dog is trained for two years before being considered as a human companion. Anyone with a physical or developmental disability who can demonstrate that a Canine Companion will enhance their independence or quality of life is eligible to apply. CCI uses Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers, in addition to mixes of the two breeds (like Phlox) for their helper dogs.

There is no charge for the animal, its training or the ongoing follow-up services. With headquarters in Santa Rosa, CA and training centers in Florida, California, Ohio, Illinois, New York and Colorado, CCI is a nationwide organization. Paul O'Brien, who is director of CCI Colorado, says that there are several types of programs going on right here in our state.

In addition to Baribeau and his pal, Phlox (who was raised by a Westminster couple), there is a program in Burlington, Colorado, where inmates in a correctional facility are raising nine puppies for CCI. "It's an amazing program and they're a real inspiration to the inmates. The dogs give them a reason to get up in the morning and to participate," reflected O'Brien. The inmates are screened prior to



being admitted to the program and they train in teams of three with each dog for 16-18 months. They help to socialize and crate-train them for future owners.

CCI is always looking for new foster puppy parents and financial donors. For more information about the organization, to donate or to apply for a dog, go to [www.cci.org](http://www.cci.org).

for more information:

**Canine Companions  
for Independence**  
(866) 224-3647  
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