

## 6 NONPROFIT SPOTLIGHT

# Organization enhances lives through priceless gifts

*Nonprofit partners disabled with loyal companions*

BY ANGELA HOLMAN | Editor

Since it was established in 1975, Canine Companions for Independence has enhanced the lives of people with disabilities by providing highly trained assistance dogs and ongoing support to ensure quality partnerships.

CCI breeds, raises and trains assistance dogs, which the nonprofit organization provides at no cost to recipients through the generosity of donors. Adults and children over the age of 5 who demonstrate the need for an assistance dog are eligible to apply.

"We see lives change literally before our eyes as teams [a disabled individual and a dog] are matched and go on to live happy and productive lives together," said Linda Valliant, southwest executive director of the nonprofit. "CCI has graduated 2,768



assistance dog teams in its 33 years of existence; more than 1,200 of those teams are currently active."

The *Carlsbad Business Journal* sat down with Valliant to discuss the organization in more detail and its work to help people with disabilities live independently.

**CBJ:** Why are the services this organization provides needed?

**Valliant:** People with disabilities often lead isolated lives because of the limitations they encounter. A CCI dog can provide increased independence and confidence in public situations. No longer does someone have to rely on a stranger to pick up the keys they drop or open a door to let their wheelchair pass; their loyal companion easily accomplishes these physical tasks. Beyond all practical tasks, our graduates tell us that the companionship and love they receive from their dogs is a priceless, life changing gift.

**CBJ:** How do you find the people your organization assists?

**Valliant:** We are constantly in the community to introduce the public to CCI and its services for people with disabilities. The majority of our graduates come to us because they have met a CCI assistance dog team or a puppy-in-training.



ABOVE LEFT: Simi Balter, program manager of CCI, teaches graduate Misty DeSpain the tug command to get her assistance dog to open doors. ABOVE RIGHT: CCI graduate Lance Weir relies on his service dog, Satine, to retrieve and deliver items he can't reach.

**CBJ:** How do you measure success?

**Valliant:** A CCI assistance dog team has an average working life of eight to 10 years. For that entire time, the dog provides practical assistance and unconditional love 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Success is seen in the thousands of times a dog retrieves a dropped object, opens a door or turns on a light to help their best friend live independently. CCI remains in close contact with the team to ensure they are working well together.

**CBJ:** How does the organization differ from other similar nonprofits?

**Valliant:** CCI pioneered the concept of using dogs to assist people with disabilities other than blindness. Our programs are recognized nationally and internationally as the premiere standard in the industry. CCI's service to its graduates also distinguishes it from most other organizations. We maintain guardianship of the dogs for their life and we take our commitment seriously. Regular follow-ups are done with each team to assure the dogs are healthy and the team is safe.

**CBJ:** What needs does the organization have?

**Valliant:** CCI could not exist without its volunteers. Our volunteer contingent is more than 2,800 strong nationwide and is the heart and soul of our program. Volunteer puppy raisers number more than 800; they invest 16 to 18 months of devoted services to get the puppies ready for advanced training. Loyal and generous private individuals, corporations and foundations provide the means to fuel our efforts. We estimate that it requires \$45,000 to support the breeding, raising and training of one Canine Companion.

**CBJ:** What do you see for the future of the nonprofit?

**Valliant:** CCI is recognized as a leader in the assistance dog industry. Our vision is to continue to provide the highest standards possible to enable people with disabilities to live with increased independence and inclusion. We also foresee more specialization of our services. For example, we are working on an initiative to be able to serve returning disabled war veterans in the most effective way.



Linda Valliant, southwest executive director of CCI, poses with Prada, which is the fourth puppy Valliant has volunteered to raise for the organization.