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Ashley Walton / Spanish Fork News

PUPPY LOVE: Showing their CCI dogs, Vecca and Hal, are Charlie Forbush, Erica Forbush, Sawyer Hamilton and Kandace Hamilton. Vecca is a CCI dog in training and Hal is a canine companion to Sawyer.

Canine companions assist with autism

Ashley Walton
STAFF WRITER

April is Autism Awareness Month and Spanish Fork resident Kandace Hamilton shared a surprising se-

cret that helps her son, Sawyer, deal with his autism: a canine companion. Canine Companions for Independence is a non-profit organization which helps both children and adults with disabili-

ties through the assistance of highly-trained professional dogs.

These dogs have been known to help people with a wide range of disabilities, from being in a wheelchair

to suffering from cerebral palsy or autism.

Sawyer had struggled with autism for several years

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before receiving his canine companion, Hal. He had a hard time going out in public or participating in crowds of people.

"He had always wanted a dog," said Kandace Hamilton. "When we really realized that he needed a pet was when we went to Sea World in California. Sawyer was able to participate in the dolphin show, and he had such a great interaction with the dolphins. We could tell a difference in his behavior immediately and we couldn't attribute it to anything else. He seemed to feel more comfortable around animals."

Kandace started researching some of the programs involving animals. Most of them were expensive, and many required that you train the animals yourself. Finally, she found the organization Canine Companions for Independence, which is free of charge and has volunteers that train the dogs. She completed an application through their website.

"It's a very long process to get accepted into the program," said Kandace. "There was a phone interview, and then a personal, one-on-one interview. And once we were accepted, we had to go to California for training and we had to pass both written and practical tests for how to take care of the dog and how to behave with the dog."

After the application process and training, Kandace and Sawyer came home with a new member of their family, Hal. Kandace explained that Hal continually affects Sawyer's life for the better.

"Having Hal has taught him a lot of responsibility and it has drawn him out of his own little world and into the real world, because he has to take care of his dog," she said.

Since Hal became a part of Sawyer's life, Sawyer has been able to go out in public more, participate in school, play with other kids, shy away from much of his anxiety and grow as an individual.

Sawyer said, "It was hard for me when I was younger to do stuff until I got Hal

and I started doing better at things that I couldn't do before. I could finally go in public more often."

Before Hal, Sawyer had a hard time at places like movie theaters and grocery stores (because of the noise), but now Sawyer totes Hal along with him and feels much more comfortable.

"Just a couple of years ago, Sawyer wouldn't be able to interact with people the way he does today," said Kandace.

Hal provides a comfort for Sawyer. Before getting Hal, Sawyer had difficulty sleeping in his bed, but ever since Hal has been by his side, he hasn't had any trouble with his sleeping habits.

Sawyer said, "If I'm ever feeling sad or angry, I just run into my room and grab Hal and he makes me feel better."

Erica Forbush, Sawyer's sister, explained that Hal also serves as a social link between Sawyer and other children, because children will come up to him and start asking him about his dog.

"Instead of being known as the kid who acts different, he's known as the kid with

the cool dog," said Erica.

Besides offering canine companions, CCI also uses volunteers to train their dogs. Each dog has to be vigorously trained and cared for. Erica is currently training a dog for the organization.

"It's a lot of work," said Erica. "It's like having a kid, but it's our way of giving back. We can take her wherever we go. Utah gives a service dog in training all the rights of a full service dog."

Although Hal has made a significant difference in Sawyer's life, Kandace realizes that a canine companion may not be the solution for every child with autism.

"Some autistic children are terrified of animals," said Kandace. "And I understand that. But my advice is to find what works for your child. Don't just stay home and do nothing and let them just do their special interests. Expand their horizons and push their limits, so you can still have a life with your family."

For more information on Canine Companions for Independence, visit www.caninecompanions.org.