

CANINE STUDENT

Senior commits to training guide dog

By **SARAH CAMPBELL**
scampbell@salisburypost.com

Alex Habeeb combined his love for animals with his commitment to community service when he tackled his senior project.

The senior at Gray Stone Day School wanted to do something creative and chose to train a Seeing Eye guide dog, but when he found out how much time it would take he decided to look into training a service dog through Canine Companions for Independence.

Canine Companions is a nonprofit organization that provides trained assistance dogs to people with disabilities.

Alex, 17, submitted an application and was interviewed by phone and in person before being selected to train a dog.

In June 2009, Alex began training Paula, a chocolate Labrador retriever, taking her to school, sporting events and mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church.

Paula was 8 weeks old when Alex got her. He spent the past 18 months training Paula with basic commands. Once she's ready, she will be returned to Canine Companions to complete training and to be placed with a person.

Each night before bed, Alex brushes Paula's teeth and works with her paws and ears to get her used to human touch. When it's time to settle in for the night, he gives her a command and she goes into a crate beside his bed for the night.

Paula wears a blue sash everywhere she goes. It's emblazoned with the name of the organization.

"She know when she's in her sash that it's time to work," said Valerie Habeeb, Alex's mother.

Paula can't play chase, climb on the furniture or eat food off the floor, but she does get to play with the Habeebs' dog, Lizzie, whenever her sash is off.

■ ■ ■
Alex said the one of the biggest

challenges he faced while training has been getting his family and friends to use the same commands, to avoid confusing Paula.

"She needs to hear the exact same thing from everybody so that she knows exactly what to do," he said.

Alex has been trained using DVDs and support from local trainers.

Salisbury resident Leigh Harlan is currently training her ninth service dog. She's been helping Alex throughout the training process, providing tips on how to handle hurdles that pop up along the way.

"The times that I've worked with

him, he's been really receptive to help," she said. "He's really good about asking if he's doing things the right way.

"I think he is an exceptional young man, very polite and very interested in doing it right and getting the feedback he needs."

Alex said watching Paula grow is rewarding.

"Just seeing her get better is great," he said. "It's good to see how she reacts to different situations we put her in and seeing her do things the right way," he said.

■ ■ ■

Joyce Butler, a teacher at Gray Stone, said she has transformed Alex.

"When he decided to work with Ca-

nine Companions for Independence his determination was ignited," she said. "It infected all his work and relationships in a most positive way.

"At the same time a more serious Alex began to emerge. His maturity evolved and he changed from a boy to a fine young man."

Butler said Alex's compassion and willingness to listen grew because of his

commitment to the project.

Throughout the training process, Paula has traveled with the family to a variety of places throughout the

county to adapt her to different settings.

Valerie said that when people meet Paula they usu-

ally share their own stories of pets who have touched their lives.

"It seems like every-

where we go people stop to tell us about how much their cat or dog means to them," she said.

The Habeebs are accepting donations for Canine Companions at the family's business, Mr. Gatti's Pizza at 122 Avalon Drive.

"We will display the photos or names of pets that people want to honor with 'paws' in memory and

thanks for our pets that make a difference in our lives," Valerie said.

■ ■ ■

Valerie said the hardest part of the experience is looming. The family will travel to Florida next week to return Paula to Canine Companions.

Dogs trained through Canine Companions can be placed with people who have

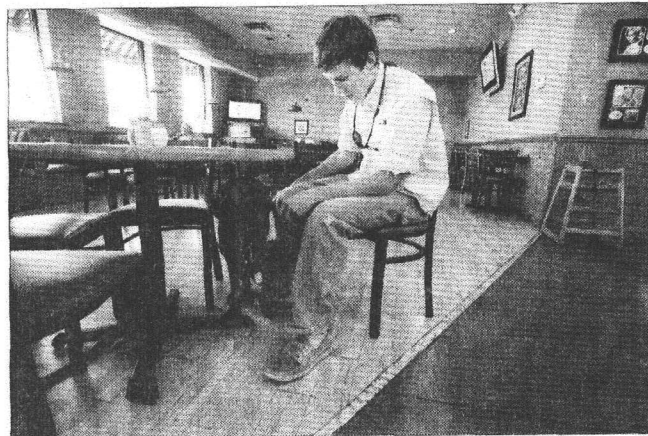


physical disabilities and the dogs can be placed in facilities such as rehabilitation centers, convalescent homes and special-education classrooms.

"I definitely get sad when I think about not having

Paula anymore, but I know she'll be helping somebody," Alex said.

Contact Sarah Campbell at 704-797-7683.



JON C. LAKEY/SALISBURY POST

Alex takes Paula just about everywhere he goes to teach her the basics of being a guide dog.