

## Spring Hill arthritis victim, helper dog a perfect match



HT photo by JEFF SCHMUCKER

Jessica McClellan claims her life is much more stress free following the completion and certification to have Gracie, a 2-year-old golden Labrador/retriever mix as a service dog that responds to more than 50 commands.

By JEFF SCHMUCKER | Hernando Today  
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SPRING HILL - Jessica McClellan is quickly getting used to life without frustration.

Whether it was picking something up or bending over to take off her socks, the 31-year-old has lived most of her life with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, which makes the simplest tasks difficult.

At less than 5 feet tall and weighing about 50 pounds - along with her hands twisted by arthritis - McClellan said that while in public she felt like people were always looking at her.

But no more.

Now with a simple command, her car keys are picked up and put in her hand. Sitting down, her shoes and socks are removed. And in public, she said people don't pay her any mind and are instead drawn to Gracie, the 2-year-old golden Labrador/retriever mix that is there as her helper and companion.

"There were times when I'd get so frustrated because my arthritis would prevent me from being able to reach my feet, so I'd go to bed with one sock on, one sock off," McClellan said. "I could get my parents to help me, but when you're frustrated you can also be stubborn. So it's a huge relief to have Gracie around."

Sitting on her porch, McClellan can issue a command for her shoes and socks to be removed. Feeling around with her teeth, Gracie kneads McClellan's foot to separate between the toes and the sock before tugging it off.

The dog can't put shoes and socks back on her feet, but McClellan said it's small functions such as this that relax her and allow her to focus on other day-to-day activities, such as crafts, planting and fishing.

McClellan recently graduated from training with Gracie through Canine Companions for Independence, a nonprofit organization that trains dogs to help those with disabilities.

She said she once considered getting a service animal, but didn't because of the [thousands of dollars](#) it costs to purchase one. Once she saw an ad for [CCI](#) that stated people with disabilities could receive a dog for free, she said she decided to submit an application.

Once accepted to the training in Orlando, she said she was paired with about four dogs before [CCI](#) officials paired her with Gracie. The dog's gentle demeanor sold [McClellan](#) on the choice, which is imperative, she said, because the [arthritis](#) prevents her from holding on too tight to Gracie's leash.

However, it wasn't as simple as pairing man's best friend with an owner. [McClellan](#) said she had to prove she could safely control [Gracie](#) in public by leading the dog on an elevator, walking through public places and whether the dog would listen to her commands.

"It's for the dog's safety as well as everyone else's so that I can get my permit to have an assistance dog in public," [McClellan](#) said. "Not only that, but these dogs have been in training since they were puppies. You have to be able to have them in public and be able to drop a piece of food on them without the dog going for it. It's really strict."

Martha Johnson, [CCI](#) public relations coordinator, said the dogs are trained from the time they're 14 to 16 months old. They are then taught to respond to more than 50 commands and be ready to help their owner open doors and retrieve items. She added they also add emotional support to their owners.

"Basically, when these dogs have their vests off, they're just like any other dog and can play and act as a pet," Johnson said. "But once those vests are on, they know it's time to work."

Those with disabilities can submit an application and be put on a waiting list so that [CCI](#) officials can screen them for both the need level of the recipient and to ensure a dog would be going to a safe place.

Meanwhile, [McClellan](#) said there are many experiences she has yet to have with [Gracie](#) to see how the dog reacts. She spends much of her time with her church performing prison ministry and singing. She also likes to fish and, despite her prompts, can't get [Gracie](#) to go after the fish.

Although she can't anticipate everything, she said she's interested to see how [Gracie](#) reacts to those new experiences - and how people surrounding her will react to her dog companion.

"It's more me than Gracie. I might get worried sometimes about how she might react to something or get spooked," [McClellan](#) said. "But [Gracie](#) goes with me everywhere and always sits really nice. It's a good change and like I said, when we're out in public together, I can just be relaxed while all the attention is on her and how beautiful she is."