

For more than 7 years, service dog has been attending Villager's needs



Villager Sara Castelli gives London a kiss. London has been a canine companion for Castelli since he was 17 months old. Bill Mitchell / Daily Sun

By PATRICIA STEELE, DAILY SUN

THE VILLAGES — London spends his days and nights on the job, waiting to be called into action.

He is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

He doesn't use a phone, and it usually takes just one word for him to come to attention.

London is a service dog, and his job is to fulfill Belle Aire resident Sara Castelli's needs both in her home and as she travels out and about The Villages in her motorized wheelchair.

"He plays, he naps, he has goof-off time, but when I speak, he's all business," Castelli said. "He knows more than 40 commands, and no matter when I call him, he's there for me."

London has been a canine companion for Castelli since he was 17 months old, and he's been constantly at her side for seven and a half years.

"Having London with me means it's not so frustrating being in a wheelchair," Castelli said. "He's very good at a number of things, but by breeding he is a retriever. His biggest service to me is to pick up the things I drop. Obviously, I can't get them, and you know the odds, if you drop something no one will be around or it's night and they're asleep."

'Robodog'

Castelli often calls London "Robodog" because he is so spot-on in knowing what she needs.

"He can anticipate what I need or want before I make my request," Castelli said.

But as a service dog, London has to wait until he receives his command from Castelli before acting.

"You don't want him picking up the wrong thing, so the dogs must be trained to act only on command," Castelli said. "I would never let him pick up a knife or broken glass, and I have dropped knives and glasses. He has to know to wait for me."

London is one of four types of dogs trained for

companion service by

Canine Companions for Independence.

He was trained as a service dog in Ohio, where Castelli obtained him, but there is a training facility in Orlando that prepares dogs for service, hearing and guide and facility work in visitation, education or health care settings as skilled companions.

"I read about Canine Companions in an Ann Landers column at least 20 years ago, and I thought that would be great for me," Castelli said. "Now, with the Internet, it's hard to imagine not having information at your fingertips. I knew there were agencies like Canine Companions out there, but even my vets didn't know which was what. Now, the information is readily available at a keystroke. We just need more people to take advantage of the services."

Informing the public of the services and needs of Canine Companions also is the goal of Margaret Ager, executive director for the Southeast region of Canine Companions.

The services are as

varied as the needs of the individuals who have a canine companion.

"Personally, this is a very fulfilling job because it gives me the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives," Ager said.

She recounted one story that has remained with her through the 13 years she has worked with Canine Companions.

“One man was talking about what the dog meant to him,” Ager said. “He was always the man in the wheelchair, and people had a tendency to overlook him. Once he received the companion, they saw the dog, followed the leash and then they saw the man.”

That sums up why this job is so important to her.

Canine Companions

“We need people to spread the word and use our services,” Ager said. “Sara is one Villager using our services, and I know there are many people that would benefit from a canine companion to make life more independent.”

She added she is sure there are individuals who would like to be puppy raisers.

Volunteers receive the Labrador or golden retriever puppies when they are eight weeks old. They give them basic obedience and socialization skills until they are 14 to 16 months old.

“It’s a lot of work to raise these puppies, but it’s a very rewarding job,” Ager said. “We would love to have more puppy raisers in The Villages area.”

The dogs then return to the training center for intensive training in their field.

Dogs used for different services receive different training.

Service dogs are taught as many as 50 different tasks and commands. They learn to act only on command from their handler. Guide dogs are trained to follow commands, but they also need to be trained in intelligent disobedience.

“These dogs have to be able to make decisions that might be different from their owner’s command,” Castelli said. “If a guide dog’s owner gives the command to walk at an intersection, and the dog sees a vehicle coming, to stay safe, that dog has to ignore its owner’s command.”

Canine Companions accepts donations from individuals and organizations to help fund the program.

The dogs are provided at no charge for individuals who need them.

“The only fee is for classes,” Castelli said. “That’s two weeks of classes with your dog, their supplies and a bag of dog food. And Canine Companions provides support and additional training as needed.”

Many people start at one level of need with their dog, then the level of need changes. The dogs sometimes need additional training, Ager explained.

“The dogs also see a vet at least once a year,” Ager said. “Then the organization receives a report on the health and status of the dog. That’s our way of making sure the animal is well cared for.”

Life after retirement

Companion dogs do retire. Castelli’s first companion dog, Bennie, short for Bennette, retired after London came to work.

Bennie would wait for London to open the door for her when they went out with Castelli. She didn’t open doors and she didn’t answer commands anymore. According to Castelli, she was quite happy to become a couch potato.

Bennie was a golden retriever and was as different from London as night and day.

“All dogs have their individual personalities,” Castelli said. “But Bennie was something else.”

If Bennie were a person, she would be the one to plan the party and be the life of the party, Castelli said.

“She would be the one on the table dancing and having a good time,” Castelli said. “If you want to plan your estate, you want London. He’s all business. Bennie was business, too, but she had fun, she had attitude.”

If there was applause, Bennie assumed it was for her, Castelli said.

“Bennie thought the world was hers, and London thinks I am the world,” Castelli said.

For more information about Canine Companions for Independence call the Orlando office at (407) 522-3300 or 1-800-572-BARK (2275).

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