

‘Denmark’ – Destined to help someone with a physical or mental disability through the Canine Companions for Independence program



By Elizabeth Butler

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— Valdostan Stephanie Motley loves dogs — she has three of them, in fact. But as she was sitting at her computer one night, she decided she wanted to combine with her love of dogs with service. She punched in “service dogs,” and the rest is history. Today she has a 4-month-old yellow Lab-Golden Retriever cross named Denmark that she is raising for the Canine Companions for Independence program.

“I am currently a volunteer puppy raiser for CCI ...,” Motley said. “As a puppy raiser, I have been given the responsibility of raising one of their dogs for 12-14 months with a goal of socializing the dog and teaching him a variety of different commands.

“Once I complete this time period, I will have to turn my puppy, Denmark, back over to CCI where he will then go to six months of advanced training. If he is successful, he will graduate and be placed with someone who has either a physical or mental disability to be their companion and helper in doing basic everyday tasks that most of us don’t even think about. Some of these include opening doors, picking up objects, alerting a deaf person of a phone or other noise, and the list goes on. Most importantly, these dogs bring companionship and often serve to increase the confidence of those they are placed with.”

Motley got Denmark when he was only 8 weeks old. She describes him as “very energetic, curious and extremely loving.” He enjoys playing with the other dogs in the house.

Denmark was the typical toddler when she got him two months ago — from the time she arrived home from work until she went to bed, she spent keeping him out of trouble. But now he is calmer, and when a visitor came by Motley’s home Wednesday to learn more about the CCI organization, Denmark spent the time at her feet, calming nursing on his favorite stuffed-ball toy.

Motley said CCI breeds all its dogs and sends out more than 600 puppies each year to puppy raisers. There is no charge for the puppies, but the puppy raisers are responsible for the proper nutrition, veterinary care and basic obedience training of the puppies. Denmark takes his obedience training at Petsmart and had his third class Tuesday night.

CCI trains four types of Canine Companions: Service Dogs who assist independent adults with physical disabilities by enhancing their ability to perform practical daily tasks such as retrieving dropped items, opening doors and turning on and off light switches; Skilled Companion Dogs who help children and adults with physical and/or developmental disabilities by performing many of the functions of the Service Dog; Hearing Dogs who benefit adults who are deaf or hard of hearing by alerting them to important everyday sounds such as an alarm clock, a doorbell, or the cry of a baby; and Facility Dogs who work at the side of able-bodied adults who are professional care givers, educators or skilled volunteers in such fields as physical and occupational therapy, special education, hospice care and hospital visitation. The writer has personally seen the joy they bring at a nursing home as well as in a hospital to a child frightened by shots and tests she had to have there.

The training of the puppies is very thorough. In fact, Motley said only 25 percent of the dogs graduate. Some may be released due to a temperament or medical problem. Sometimes the puppy raiser chooses to keep the dog as a pet or it may go to a police, fire or other government agency for detection work.

Giving up the puppy after growing to love it is sometimes difficult for the puppy raiser.

“You have to think of the end result,” Motley said.

She relayed the story of a wheelchair-bound young man named Brandon, who received a CCI dog, Elaine, when he was 12 years old.

“Now I’m a student at Purdue University and Elaine is by my side, faithfully picking things up off the floor for me, and helping me with physical tasks so that I can focus on my education,” he said. “I want people to know that Elaine does more for me than perform physical tasks for me. Of course, she’s given me good times and lots of laughs. But, she also gives me encouragement. A new perspective on life. Companionship. Self-confidence. Independence. Hope.”

CCI is a nonprofit organization and receives no federal funds. Instead, the funding comes from private contributions from individuals, businesses, civic groups and clubs and grants from corporations and foundations. The organization is headquartered in Santa Rosa, Calif., with the Southeast Regional Center in Orlando, Fla.

To learn more about CCI, those interested may visit its Web site at www.cci.org or call 1-800-572-2275 (BARK).

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Photos

Pat Gallagher/The Valdosta Daily Times Denmark is a 4 month old cross breed Lab and Golden Retriever that when fully trained will possibly become a valuable companion for a handicapped person.