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CCI dogs are caretakers to the disabled

By Amy Quesinberry

It must be hard to raise a puppy and then give it away. But Rose Jefferson has done it nine times and is ready to take in another four-legged furball — because she knows the difference it makes in the lives of people with disabilities.

The Winter Garden resident was first introduced to Canine Companions for Independence 13 years ago when her daughter's friend, who is physically disabled, received an assistance dog from the organization.

"I started reading about the program and found information on volunteer puppy raisers," Jefferson said. "It seemed like a nice volunteer activity that my daughter, Eileen, and I could do together."



Rose Jefferson (above) and her daughter, Eileen (not pictured), helped raise Runk for Canine Companions for Independence. Photo by Diesta Gundacker

Eileen Jefferson, now 31, is developmentally disabled, her mother said, "but I have always tried to encourage her to give back to her community and try to help others."

So, even though Rose Jefferson had no experience with potty-training puppies, she signed up to bring one into her home.

"Thankfully, CCI gives you lots of information on puppy raising and the staff was always there to answer my questions," she said. "So, we began a wonderful journey with our first puppy, Antonio."

On Saturday, Jefferson handed over Runk, her ninth puppy, during CCI's matriculation and graduation ceremony at SeaWorld Orlando. The black Labrador retriever/golden retriever mix accompanied her everywhere during the training phase. This included her job at Hospice of the Comforter.

She said she is grateful to all the local businesses for allowing her to bring Runk inside to help with his socialization skills.

"This is one of the most important responsibilities of being a puppy raiser," Jefferson said. "These dogs are going to be an integral part of the life of a person with a disability. They are going to have to perform in a variety of environments and situations."

Jefferson admits it's never easy letting go of a puppy that has been her sidekick for more than a year, but, she said, "When you see the changes one of these dogs can make in the life of a person with a disability, it makes it

just a little bit easier.”

The experience was a little different this time for Jefferson. Runk was being raised by a couple in Oviedo, Barbara and Rex Clonts, but when Barbara died unexpectedly, the dog was given to Jefferson to finish the puppy-raising phase. She said he is one of the smartest puppies she has raised and he learned his commands quickly and with little effort on her part.

Clonts and Jefferson were both present at Saturday’s program to hand Runk over for his team training.

At last weekend’s ceremony, seven graduating dogs were presented to their new companions, four of whom were children.

CCI’s Southeast Regional Center is on Clarcona-Ocoee Road. The national non-profit organization has served people with disabilities since 1975, providing the dogs at no charge.

For information on raising a puppy or volunteering at the regional center, go to cci.org/volunteer. To apply for an assistance dog and on-going services, go to cci.org/apply. The local CCI center can also be reached at 407-522-3300.