

July 14, 2008

News-Journal
Daytona Beach, Florida
Man's best friend is boy's skilled companion

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EDGEWATER -- Trevor Wyatt cannot speak, but there is happiness in his grin. The 6-year-old plops a hand on his dog's blond fur, stroking it from his wheelchair as he rolls past rows of houses on a balmy summer afternoon.

Kresge, a 2-year-old Labrador and golden retriever mix, sticks close to Trevor's left wheel. He lets out a tongue-filled yawn, though this isn't your typical dog's cushy life.

Sure, he goes out for walks and gets belly rubs. But Kresge, who dons a blue vest in public, is a skilled companion dog.

His human partner, Trevor, has cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder that affects body movement and muscle coordination. Kresge, (pronounced Kres-gee) is his assistant, foremost friend and fur-ball.

Chosen for this vocation before birth, he is part of a skilled fleet of dogs from the Canine Companions for Independence. The national nonprofit organization provides highly trained assistance dogs and support to enhance the lives of people with disabilities.

After just a few months at home with his new family, Kresge has done that and more for Trevor and his parents, Michele and Jimmy Wyatt. He assists them in daily tasks, but more than anything he's become a great friend.

"We can't imagine life without him," Trevor's mom said.

As Trevor's assistance dog, that means sisters Marisa, 11, and Patricia, 17, can't interact with Kresge too much to ensure the bond remains with



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Trevor Wyatt with canine companion Kresge, his mother, Michele, and sister Marisa walk through their Edgewater neighborhood recently.

their brother, a giggly boy with light brown hair and eyes who needs a wheelchair to get around.

Placing an assistance dog with a candidate depends on a variety of factors, such as the candidate's abilities, behaviors, and equipment he or she uses, said Lori Lindsay, a spokeswoman for Canine Companions at the organization's southeast campus in Orlando.

"We focus on most aspects of the candidate's life and personality," she said.

Nationally, the group places about 200 canines with human partners every year.

Because Trevor can't talk, his parents are Kresge's facilitators. But before bringing him home in April, the Wyatts needed some training of their own.

They attended a two-week intensive course at Canine Companions' Orlando campus with Trevor, where they learned about canine theories, verbal commands and

even grooming skills.

It was during this training session that they also were matched with Kresge. The Wyatts worked with several dogs before finding a good fit. Michele said trainers assured her that their future dog would eventually learn to walk alongside a wheelchair when a bond is formed.

But once paired with Kresge, it seemed it was meant to be.

"He just automatically walked up beside Trevor, and that's when I said, 'Jimmy, this is the one,' " said the mom, who came to tears when she saw them connect.

Like any dog, though, Kresge enjoys his chew toys and occasionally gets in to trouble, her husband said, mentioning how he rummaged through their garbage a few times. His unusual name is in honor of the Kresge Foundation, a nonprofit group that made a substantial donation to help build Canine Companions' Orlando campus in 2001.

During their training, the Wyatts not only attended lectures on campus but also tested their proficiency and their dog's skills at a food court in an Orlando mall. The family had lunch while Kresge calmly remained on the floor.

"When he's out in public, he's supposed to be invisible," explained Trevor's dad, who can command the dog to go under a table. "A lot of people, when we leave a restaurant, say, 'Oh, we didn't even know you had a dog.' "

That's the "ultimate compliment" for Kresge, the father added.

On trips or walks in the neighborhood, he remains at Trevor's side -- often soothing the boy when he cries by laying his head in his lap or staying close for Trevor to run his fingers through his fur.

"He has a big calming effect on Trevor," his mom said.

Assistance dogs from Canine Companions begin ba-

sic obedience training as puppies. They go through at least six months of formal training to master about 50 verbal commands before undergoing team training with candidates.

The group uses golden retrievers, Labradors and mixes of the breeds, said Patrice Shields, a development associate with the organization.

"They are by nature working dogs," she said. "That's what they love to do." Among his abilities, Kresge can retrieve a fallen item, such as Trevor's toys, push a door open, pull a drawer open with a rope, flip a light switch and even push an elevator button -- though there's a 50/50 chance he'll push the right one.

But besides the physical help he provides, he's also become the Wyatts' social bridge in a society that often shuns or doesn't know how to act when they see a young boy in a wheelchair.

Children gasp in amazement when they see Kresge in a building, wondering how the dog was allowed in.

"They'll ask to pet him," Trevor's mom said, "and right away, I'll make sure to introduce Trevor."

The dog helps people acknowledge him as a person, as opposed to just staring, she said. Talking with strangers seems to help her son maintain eye contact and better head control so he can see what's happening around him.

And even though it's been a few months since Trevor and the dog met, it seems Kresge knows when he's needed, she said.

Sitting on the couch beside his mom, Trevor is quiet until a friendly lick interrupts his silence.

"Did you get kisses?" she asked, as her son burst into laughter.

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Canine Companions for Independence

The Canine Companions for Independence organization was founded in 1975 to provide free, highly trained assistance dogs to people with disabilities. The national nonprofit group, headquartered in Santa Rosa, Calif., has a southeastern campus in Orlando, where training, education and nurturing takes place at an 8-acre facility.

The group's southeast region boasts 210 active graduate teams, 130 puppy raisers and more than 600 volunteers.

To learn how to apply and qualify for an assistance dog, volunteer or make a monetary donation, visit Canine Companions' Web site at www.cci.org or call 800-572-BARK (2275).