

Special Parws

a hush falls over the classroom as its students undertake their first topic of the day; a pop math quiz - never a favourite. Suddenly, from somewhere, a voice can be heard to mutter, "Ah pickles!" and then, "Trudy hold!". Emerging from under a desk is a black and white dog that quickly retrieves the dropped pencil and returns it to its owner. "Good girl Trudy" followed by lots of pats and a big hug. "Now, on your mat please", at which point the dog dutifully returns to its spot under the desk. So begins the school day of a very special and courageous young lady and her much beloved Disability Assist Dog.

Born with Cerebral Palsy and visual processing difficulties, Emma, at 13, has had to deal with more in her short life than most people will experience in a lifetime. Told by the doctors that she most probably would never walk or talk, life has been tough, living each day with pain and discomfort. School, in particular, has been a challenge; not only from the social side of things but also the physical, where doing everyday 'normal' activities takes a huge effort and is fraught with danger from overbalancing and falls. Some days the effort is just so much that by 10am she is completely exhausted. When Emma was younger her teacher-aide would pick up dropped items for her, but it didn't solve the problem of having difficulty making friends.

This got us thinking about how we could encourage the children to spend time with her, and slowly an idea was born. The principal, to her credit, was very receptive and, after a thorough assessment of the situation, gave a very positive "Go for it" whereby Trudy, (Rimrock Trudy on Return) our border collie, was enrolled in school!

At 6 years of age, already a very obedient dog (Test A), Trudy had no trouble maintaining impeccable behavior and attracting huge crowds of children who talked and walked with Emma. It was great! Everyone was so encouraging, parents and teachers alike. It was a natural progression for us to think about more ways of getting Trudy to help Emma in school: ways to maximize Emma's learning time by minimizing her physical effort, while at the same time encouraging her independence.

It was towards the end of 2010 that we heard about Perfect Partners Disability Assistance Dog Trust and contacted them. Trudy, now 8, had been accompanying Emma to school for a couple of years and was performing many tasks for her, such as retrieving pens and pencils, books and papers; carrying bags; getting her hat out of the draw; and even finding her clothing amongst the other children's (scent discrimination!). Trudy also walked with Emma in the playground and instinctively missed objects which would trip Emma up. It was amazing to see the tremendous progress which Emma had made and the confidence she had gained in herself. To trust Trudy enough to walk by herself where-as before she would only walk holding onto a person's arm - it brought tears to all our eyes!

In November 2011 Trudy was officially certified as a Disability Assist Dog with full public access rights. At nearly 10 years old Trudy is still going strong, but we know she can't go on forever. There is another little border collie in the wings who will take over the 'harness' when Trudy relinquishes it. Mouse is her name (Weyahead Silver Queen) and, like Trudy, she carries the late Colleen Pitt's Rimrock lines displaying those qualities we cherish and which have made it possible to undertake this little project for Emma: intelligence, gentleness, patience and loyalty.

Emma would like to send a heartfelt thank you to some special people: to Bob Pitt, Noel Hutchinson, Perfect Partners Assistance Dog Trust, and our friends at Woofles Gourmet Pet Foods, for their continued support and encouragement. Without your help, this dream would not have become a reality.

By Debbie Shaw

