



Custom Trained Dogs Improve The Lives Of Children

By Daniel Casciato



Six-year-old Lucas Mitchell fell in love with his dog, Teagin, the very first time he saw her. Lucas quickly ran over to the dog and laid on top of her in an embrace. "It was like they were meant to be together," recalls his mother, Sara Mitchell, about that September day nearly two years ago.

This was more than your typical "boy and his best friend" bonding moment for Sara and her husband, Nick, of Markleysburg, PA.

Lucas has autism, a neurological disorder that affects communication, social, emotional, cognitive, self-help and motor skills. Children with autism usually have difficulty forming relationships with people and animals. Although Lucas was comfortable around his parents and seven-year-old brother, Justus, he was unable to adjust to the environment outside his home.

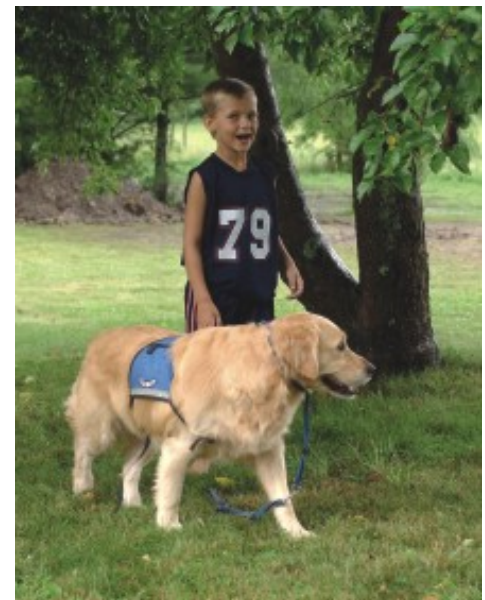
"We really couldn't take him out in public because he would have what some may describe as panic attacks," says Sara. "He would sometimes just scream and pound on the floor with his fists."

Through her parents, the Mitchells learned about a program in Ontario, where Sara is originally from, that trains service dogs specifically to help children with autism. "Unfortunately, there was a six-year wait," says Sara. "So we did some online research to see if there were similar programs elsewhere."

That's when they came across New Hope Assistance Dogs, Inc., a non-profit organization in Warren, PA, dedicated to training dogs to enhance the lives of those with physical disabilities. New Hope dogs are custom trained and equipped to each recipient's specific needs. They are taught obedience, social skills, along with over 50 commands to aid their clients and give them more independence, confidence and stability in all aspects of life.

Within six months, they were able to match Lucas with Teagin, a golden retriever who will be four years old on Halloween. The difference Teagin has made on Lucas has been amazing according to Sara. "The biggest change has been the fact that Lucas no longer fears going out into public," she says. "Teagin has given him more confidence in new surroundings."

Teagin accompanies Lucas everywhere, even to school where she is part of the classroom at Franklin Elementary in Vanderbilt. "Teagin has given him so much more confidence and independence at school that Lucas was released from his aid this past spring," says Sara.



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Teagin is on duty nearly 24/7. However, when her service vest is removed, she runs off and plays like any normal dog. When the vest is put back on, she understands her role as Lucas' companion.

Like all good dogs, Teagin also serves as his protector. On a cool fall afternoon last September, days after remnants of Hurricane Ivan dropped buckets of rain across the region, Teagin saved Lucas from drowning.

Sara had just stepped inside the house to check on dinner while Justus and Lucas were playing in the yard. When she returned, they were gone. Not seeing them anywhere nearby, she jumped into her car to look for them. Less than 100 yards from their house, she saw Lucas being dragged by Teagin from a 30-foot by 40-foot by 30-foot concrete water retainer that was being used for sewer work in the neighborhood.

"She saved his life," says Sara. "If she wasn't there, Lucas would have drowned."



Lucas is still making remarkable progress to date. Up until a couple of years ago, he couldn't say one word. Now he can say approximately 30-40 words.

"His verbal skills have never been his strongest point, but it has been improving," says Sara. "The most important thing is that he's interacting more with others. He's comfortable in a social setting now. We owe it to Teagin. She's made a world of difference in Lucas and all of our lives."

Mary and Larry Payne of Titusville have seen the same effect on their daughter Justice, 10 ½, who has hearing loss and wears two hearing aids. Justice was recently matched up with Quinn, a 2-year-old black Lab/Beagle mix.

"She has always had a great love for animals, especially dogs, so we contacted New Hope who was very enthusiastic about helping Justice," says Mary. The dog companion Quinn alerts Justice - to the sounds, people and objects near her that she can't hear - by touching Justice on the leg with her nose.

"He's been a constant companion for Justice and she just feels better knowing that Quinn is there to help her," says Mary. "She's become more mature with the responsibility of having Quinn, and she's more comfortable around other kids."

Justice's hearing is expected to get worse and may continue until she is about 15 years old. Mary says Justice told her it's scary, but that she'll be okay because she has Quinn to help her.

"We just want to do our best as her parents to provide everything possible to help her be the best person she can be," she says. "We think having Quinn is one more tool to help her through. It is a lot of responsibility to have a child with a disability, but with God's help and the help of our friends and community, we go forward every day, thankful for what we have."

For more information about New Hope, visit www.newhopedogs.org.