

: Good article in today's Hamilton Spectator on Dog Guides

Guide dog wait times reduced for deaf and disabled



Massimo Simonelli

Wait times for dogs to help people with hearing, medical or physical disabilities are less than a quarter of what it usually takes.

Dogs are being placed within three months compared to a typical wait of more than a year at the Oakville-based Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guides.

The foundation, which pays the entire \$20,000 cost, is encouraging Canadians to apply for special skills and hearing ear dogs while the waits are low.

"She's the best thing that's ever happened to me," said 12-year-old Massimo Simonelli about his black Labrador Sandy. "She changed my whole life."

The Stoney Creek boy was born more than three months premature weighing one pound 12 ounces and has cerebral palsy requiring a wheelchair or walker to get around.

He waited more than two years before getting Sandy in November.

"I was really excited like my mouth was stuck open," said Massimo. "I call her my best friend. She's very gentle and lovable."

Before getting the dog, Massimo couldn't go anywhere alone — tough for a grade seven kid striving for independence. Now, he can go on walks, go out with friends and do more things for himself. Sandy opens doors, helps him put on his jacket, picks things up and gets help if he falls or gets stuck.

"I know there's someone to protect me and keep me safe," he said. "I find it quite fun. It makes me older."

The foundation believes one of the reasons the waits are low is a lack of awareness that dog guides aren't just for the visually impaired. Massimo's mom found out about the foundation because she met clients with dog guides in the course of her work as a home care nurse.

The foundation, funded by donations, has five types of dog guides: hearing ear dogs for the deaf or hard of hearing; special skills dogs for those with medical or physical disabilities; seizure response dogs for people who have epilepsy; autism assistance for children aged 4 to 12 and vision dogs for the blind and visually impaired.

Waits are still over a year for most dog guides but are low for hearing ear and special skills.

"It's amazing what a dog can do and the impact a dog can have," said Natalie Moncur, spokesperson for Dog Guides. "A lot of our clients say they felt like it was a burden on other people to constantly ask for help. When they don't have to do that anymore, it's liberating."

Beth Bennett's dog is named Happy because of the joy the golden retriever will bring to her life. The two — picked for each other because they are both sensitive and sweet — are spending three weeks living and training together at the foundation before the 41-year-old Burlington woman takes Happy home. This is the second dog guide she's had since a stroke 11 years ago left her disabled on the left side. Tears spring to her eyes when she talks about all of the ways her first guide dog Bella changed her life. She found a whole new level of independence and Bella was an icebreaker that helped Bennett become more social. She was devastated when Bella died of old age but is looking forward to finding companionship again with Happy.

"I did a lot more things because of Bella," said Bennett. "It's an awesome program."

For more information about how to apply go to www.dogguides.com or call 1-800-768-3030.

jfrketich@thespec.com