

UDS Service Dogs Give People A New "Leash" On Life

By Dayna M. Reidenouer

Washington Boro resident Glenn Henry has a new canine companion. Just 23 months old, the black Labrador retriever named Ellie was raised and trained through UDS Service Dogs. Ellie will accompany Henry everywhere he goes, in order to provide assistance as needed.

Henry became a quadriplegic as the result of a swimming accident in 1966. Thirteen years ago, Henry adopted a 2 year old German shepherd named Meg, who spent her days by his side until 2008, when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Meg recently passed away.

Without Meg, Henry lost a small measure of independence. Service dogs can learn over 80 commands, such as opening doors, giving wallets to cashiers, and most importantly for Henry, retrieving items. As a result of his paralysis, Henry cannot bend over and pick up objects.

"The biggest thing for me is if I drop something, it's way down there (out of reach on the floor)," Henry explained.

Ellie and Henry were matched by UDS Service Dogs earlier this summer. Before Ellie was allowed to go home with Glenn, the pair met once or twice a week for several weeks with program manager Jill Harris to train both dog and main to work together. On Aug. 14, Ellie and the woman who raised her, Rhonda Taylor of Conestoga, met Henry and Harris at a large hardware store. The foursome moved through the aisles in an effort to sensitize Ellie to the sights and sounds around her, Harris said. Afterward, they approached Henry's van.



As UDS Service Dogs trainer Jill Harris (right) waits inside the van and puppy raiser Rhonda Taylor (far left) observes, Glenn Henry and his new service dog, Ellie, learn to work together when getting in and out of the van.

"The key is loading and unloading," Harris said. "When they master that, Ellie can go home with Glenn."

After several tries, Ellie began to get used to a new routine. As a reward, Henry offered her a small container filled with peanut butter, which Ellie lapped up with gusto.

"Ellie loves peanut butter," Henry said. "It's hard for me to hold small treats, so we use peanut butter in a container I can manage instead."

Two weeks later, Ellie was declared ready to live with Henry. The pair will continue to go to training activities and work with Harris. When Ellie successfully accompanies Henry on public transportation, she will be certified as an official service dog.

"It's almost like I've had Ellie for months. She's coming along really well," Henry said.

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The necessity of a service dog was underscored in a previous summer when Henry's wheelchair got stuck in the yard in 90 degree heat, and Meg was in the house, Henry said that if he had dropped his cell phone, he would have been unable to call for help. He added that he has learned of other situations where service dogs saved their owners' lives by attracting others' attention or following explicit commands.

The cost to train a service dog is \$20,000. UDS asks recipients to pay \$5,000. Thanks to churches, civic associations, service clubs, and corporations, some individuals receive assistance in paying their part of the cost. The remainder of the cost is absorbed by UDS, which depends on volunteers to make the Service Dogs program successful. Volunteers can help in a variety of ways, from raising puppies or providing respite care to playing with and exercising puppies and helping them improve their socialization skills.

Taylor, who is now raising her third puppy for UDS, said that although it is hard to say goodbye to the dogs that she raises, the promise of helping others is well worth the sacrifice involved.

For more information about UDS Service Dogs and how to become a recipient or a volunteer, readers may visit www.udservices.org or call Harris a 397-1841