

Canine Assistants

Subhead to Come

By Trish Riley 2003

Just three months after moving his wife and four children from Utah to Colorado, Randy Werner, a 34-year old who worked in the radio and television industry, came down with an unidentified virus. "I went from walking, stumbling, using cane to using braces and crutches to eventually using a wheelchair – I use a wheelchair full-time," Randy says today, 16 years later. "My whole life changed."

Randy's life is about to change again, this time for the better. He'll soon have a new companion – thanks to a new SAM'S CLUB® partnership, he'll be the first recipient of a Canine Assistant, a Golden Retriever or Labrador trained specifically to provide assistance to those in need because of illness or disability.

The Canine Assistants program was started in Georgia by a young woman who was temporarily disabled by Multiple Sclerosis, which has since gone into remission. Jennifer Arnold and her mother began raising money for the project with donation cans at their local Walmart store. "I must say that Roswell, Georgia Walmart was literally what kept us operating to begin with," says Jennifer. "My mom and I would go every week with our little screwdrivers and empty out those little cans. I'd say we averaged about \$140 a week."

Jennifer's company has trained 350 dogs – at a cost of more than \$10,000 each – and placed them with people who need them, at no charge. Thanks to corporate sponsorship from Milk Bone and retail partnerships with companies such as SAM'S CLUB, the dogs veterinary care, training and even food are paid for life. "It's such a pleasure to work with Canine Assistants," says Tanya Conovaloff, spokeswoman for Milk Bone. "Jennifer has such a passion for this – you leave there feeling like you're on cloud nine."

Jennifer appreciates the help as much as recipients appreciate their companions. "I really did not want this to be another expense for people that need help. That is incredibly important to me, that we bear the burden of that. However, in lieu of any monetary payment, every recipient agrees to do a minimum of 60 hours of community service in their hometown, using their dog."

Jennifer met Randy at a celebration event at the Glendale, Arizona SAM'S CLUB, awarding him a Canine Assistant. Randy has plans for his dog. After training, which includes two weeks of camp for dogs and their new owners, next spring. "I travel all over Arizona and the dog will go with me. I'm

hoping to get the dog to help promote service dogs to others." As he and his family learned to cope with his paralysis, Randy developed skills that he now shares with others in similar circumstances. A SAM'S CLUB Business Member, his company, Upward Motions, contracts with the state to offer his classes Running True and Personal Responsibility Empowerment Program to help others with disabilities lead more independent lives.

"I honestly believe that with the right info and the right attitude, people can handle whatever comes their way," says Randy. "I try to provide that hope with positive tools that they can use each and every day of their lives. There is life after disability."

Randy enjoys spreading the word by singing – he's had the chance to perform for several athletic events, and often uses music to educate others about disability. Now he'll have a partner to help get that message out.

The dogs are trained to turn on and off lights, retrieve things, get help, get the phone, help with laundry, pull wheelchairs, the list goes on to include more than 80 commands. But it's more than just assistance, says Jennifer. "The real magic is how the dog perceives you as perfect."

"I'm so excited about what we've been able to do. Every single day new applications come in - there are 500 waiting right now. I know we can help every one of them with such a simple, life-changing solution. But it's all about money."

Randy understands her point. "One of the problems is that a lot of people with disabilities don't have money for training," he says. That's where Milk Bone comes in – the company has sponsored 216 dogs since 1997, and SAM'S CLUB Members have helped support the program by purchasing Milk Bone products. Now SAM'S CLUB is helping even more, by underwriting dogs for those in need.

"What a blessing," says Randy. 

