

SPECIAL FEATURE

# NEW-FOUND FREEDOM

*Canine Companions for  
Independence give their  
disabled owners just that —  
independence.*

by Janet Herring-Sherman

At dawn, Cashew awakens and stretches, then reaches up and gently places a paw on the shoulder of the little girl still sound asleep. Once she stirs, Cashew's tail starts waving happily from side to side, and he rushes off to find her slippers and deliver them to her lap.

And so the day begins, much like that of other youngsters — except that this little girl counts on her dog for essential help all day long. Cashew, a handsome Golden Retriever, is a Canine Companion Service dog trained to carry out the many daily tasks his seven-year-old mistress, Melissa, cannot. Born with muscular dystrophy, Melissa is unable to stand or walk. She is brave about her physical limitations. As one of her doctors comments, "She has a great will to do for herself." And now she can — with the help of her Canine Companion.

Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), a non-profit, tax-exempt organization founded in 1975, trains specially bred dogs like Cashew to assist people with disabilities other than blindness. *Service* dogs aid people with orthopedic challenges; *Signal* dogs alert the hearing-impaired and deaf to crucial sounds; *Social* dogs are placed with individuals or in institutions as part of Pet Facilitated Therapy, and *Specialty* dogs are trained for individuals who are older or have multiple disabilities.

CCI is headquartered in Santa Rosa, California, and the waves of independence creat-

ed by these amazing dogs have been felt around the world. More than 195 Canine Companions are working for disabled individuals in Canada, Israel and Holland, as well as throughout the United States.

When CCI's founder, Bonita Bergin, conceived the idea of training dogs to help people in wheelchairs, dog trainers and rehabilitation personnel alike insisted it would never work. But Bonita did not agree. Dogs had been helping man for 15,000 years and she was confident they were capable of adding this meaningful new role to their repertoire. Against all odds, the CCI program survived and now flourishes, with 60 dogs scheduled to graduate in 1986.

Bonita's motivation for pioneering the Service dog concept was fired by her firm belief that people with disabilities should not have to stay in institutions, but rather should have the opportunity to manage their own lives independently.

Indeed, Canine Companions have turned life around for disabled individuals of all ages. For children, they speed up the process of mainstreaming, while teens report their Canine Companions act as ice breakers and catalysts for social interaction with peers. At the other end of the age spectrum, these loyal and loving dogs add a special dignity to growing old. Tail-wagging Canine Companions — intent on affection — also act as physical therapists, encouraging arthritic hands to move again.

## POWERFUL 'MEDICINE'

One very special Social dog, a Pembroke Welsh Corgi aptly named Quality, is a loving therapist to her young autistic mistress, evoking a verbal response where no human could. At age 12, Allison had never slept through the night. Quality changed all that.

The first night Quality spent with Allison, the intuitive canine took it upon herself to snuggle next to the child at bedtime. In the morning, Allison's mother found her daughter still fast asleep, with an arm thrown over the cuddly Corgi. Since then, Allison has continued to sleep well — alongside her Canine Companion guardian angel.

These dogs offer help physically by pulling wheelchairs, nudging light switches on with their noses and off with paws, and by picking up dropped pencils, keys and other personal items unreachable from wheelchairs. Just as important, Canine Companions help their masters discover a true sense of self-worth.

## INTENSIVE TRAINING

Canine Companion recipients are required to attend a two-week training session at the Northwest Regional Training Center in northern California. Many students emerge from this course assertive and self-confident enough to take on paying jobs or attend school — all because the Canine Companions at their sides helped them to see new things within themselves. Financially, Canine Companions can save their disabled masters up to \$90,000 in attendant care.

Canine Companions learn an unprecedented 89 working commands. Training begins at weaning, when the offspring of carefully selected CCI breeding stock are placed in foster puppy homes for a year and a half. Here the pups learn and grow in a loving environment. Puppy raisers and their charges attend regular obedience classes at CCI. As the adolescent dogs become more and more adept at basic commands and social manners, they begin to take on the sense of responsibility so vital to their careers.

The young dogs return to CCI for final training, which is customized to each individual animal. They spend six months learning the more complex commands, like pulling wheelchairs, turning light switches on and off, and pressing elevator buttons. The dogs in training are tested and retested again and again, in public and private, to make certain they are consistent and reliable workers. Indeed, breeds used as Canine Companions — Golden and Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherd Dogs, Standard Poodles, Border Collies and Pembroke Welsh Corgis — are the most willing of partners to people with disabilities. They seem born to the task. ☆

*It costs \$5,000 to raise, train and monitor each Canine Companion. CCI is funded entirely by private donations and receives no government funding. If you or your dog club are interested in membership information, please write Canine Companions for Independence, P.O. Box 446, Santa Rosa, CA 95402, or phone (707) 528-0830.*

**TOP LEFT:** Love is a most cherished gift. The unselfish love a puppy raiser bestows on a Canine Companion puppy works a special kind of magic — it helps prepare the young dogs to become devoted, responsible partners to individuals with disabilities. This Welsh Corgi puppy, Victory, will one day be a highly skilled Canine Companion Signal dog alerting her deaf master to crucial sounds like a baby crying or a smoke alarm.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Six years old, Tyler is the youngest person ever to receive a Canine Companion Service dog. The smiles on the faces of both boy and dog are testimony that this is a match made in heaven. Actually, Tyler and his Canine Companion, Hancock, were paired during an intensive two-week training session conducted at the CCI training center in California. (Tyler and his family live in Colorado.) Canine Companions carry their masters' belongings in specially-designed backpacks. Tyler says that when Hancock is not wearing the pack, he is like Clark Kent; when he is, Hancock is Superman.