

I AM A 60 YEAR OLD Hirschsprung's disease patient with an ileostomy, a gastrostomy and a Hickman for intravenous feeding. However; I feel very special as I have a wonderful service dog, named Zev, who has absolutely changed my perspective on life and has allowed the beautiful, unique inner me to surface.

Now, I did not always have a dog. First let me tell you what life was like before I had Zev. I had an aide who used to come in the morning and spend the day with me and was not meeting many of my physical needs. She mainly wanted to help me bathe, make my bed, and toilet me. This was not helpful to me as I was able to shower and toilet myself. What I actually needed was someone to prepare my TPN, to give me more hands to change my ostomy wafer, and to help me flush my gastrostomy. The aide claimed that these were beyond the scope of her duties as they were RN responsibilities. So basically, all she did was make my bed and carry things for me. I prepared the aide lunch. I listened to the aide's personal problems and did my best to help her. There was something wrong with this picture. I was helping her more than she was helping me!

In addition, my aide was taking me to doctor's appointments and sitting in the examining room with disinterest. As I am a chronic rare digestive disease patient, I have noticed that doctors frequently feel at a loss with their lack of experience and the little research on rare diseases. Consequently, it is not uncommon for the patient to be told to get psychological help for physical symptoms. I found it even more frustrating not to get the emotional support from my aide during these times.

I started feeling very confined to the aide's schedule and feeling stressed at trying to accomplish my own errands while listening to my aide's daily problems. I was not able to get beyond my own personal needs. I really wanted to get out more and be with my peers and volunteer in the community without being held back by the aide's working hours and issues.

It was at this point that my daughter suggested I get a service dog. Like the aide, the dog would not be able to help me with my TPN or flushing my gastrostomy. However, he could hold packaged ostomy supplies when I needed a few extra hands to change my wafer. In addition, he could pick things up from the floor, get my shoes, help me up from a chair or the floor by bracing his back, carry bags in his mouth, turn lights on and off and open and shut doors. Best of all, he would never be late or leave early or chew my

Zev and Me

by Lynn Wolfson



ear off with his problems! Lastly, he would give me unconditional love twenty-four/seven!

So it was decided that we would hire a service dog trainer to come with us to the Humane Society to help us choose the best dog to train to be my service dog. Our service dog trainer, Jillian, selected Zev – a bull mastiff/American Bulldog. She trained him for three months as he was already a trained pet. Once Zev was trained, I continued to train him to do more things on my own. I was able to do this because Zev and I developed a wonderful emotional connection. Zev started not only going wherever I went but also traveling with me all over the United States. We started by going to national conferences on TPN, ostomies, and Hirschsprung's disease. I needed to learn how to help myself since the doctors did not have the experience of having other patients with Hirschsprung's and the research for rare diseases is minimal. I was going to find other patients and national experts. Zev is a wonderful companion to have on these trips as he is a conversation starter and I am noticed. I met many people who have become my friends and, became very knowledgeable and even more independent with my medical equipment. After having Zev for a year and a half, I discontinued my aide. Freedom!

I became even more active with my digestive disease organizations. As my confidence started to grow, I started speaking. I spoke in front of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Digestive Disease National Coalition (DDNC) on Capitol Hill (Washington DC), at The Capitol in Tallahassee and at an Oley Conference. Additionally, Zev and I were filmed by Animal Planet for the show "Collar of Duty" which is airing all over the world.

I started driving on my own, swimming a half a mile three times a week, and becoming active in my community by going to a knitting group where we knit hats for cancer patients. Zev and I also enjoy other volunteer endeavors which include taking senior citizens to doctors' appointments and shopping, and packing groceries for Holocaust Survivors.

Doctors' appointments are no longer intimidating. I now have the knowledge, the confidence and the support of my beloved Zev! I am so grateful to Zev for giving me the freedom to travel, to learn and to be able to help others claim their independence. With Zev, I am living life to the fullest!! ■

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