

The Rewards of Raising Tohru



On February 6, 2008, during an assembly at the Fiske School in Lexington, MA, Kim Efron, a Massachusetts Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) Tutor at the



school, asked the audience to please welcome a special guest. As he sauntered out to greet the audience, the students and teachers greeted him with

enthusiastic applause. He had attended the school regularly for the past several months, and had become a beloved friend to many. True to his nature, he greeted the crowd with calm confidence, sitting at Kim's side, gazing out upon the sea of students and teachers.

"We have all enjoyed having Tohru at Fiske Elementary, and you were all good teachers for him," Kim explained to the children, "But now it's time for Tohru to go off to college." An audible "ohhh" resonated through the audience, registering both pride and sadness at knowing their time spent with their friend would soon be over.

The college Tohru will be attending may not be Ivy League, but it's admissions requirements are strict, and it accepts only those students who show promise of fulfilling a successful future being of service to others. Oh, and they must have four paws, fur, and a tail, for this particular college is an exclusive, dogs-only school run by the Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) program.

A CAPABLE ASSISTANCE DOG

Founded in 1975, the CCI is a non-profit organization that provides highly trained assistance dogs and ongoing support to people with disabilities. The group has campus facilities in several areas throughout the country, including California, Colorado, Ohio, Illinois, New York, and Florida. Through the program, dogs are trained to become one of four different types of assistance dogs:

- ▶ Service dogs – providing one-on-one assistance to people with physical disabilities with activities of daily living.
- ▶ Hearing dogs – alerting the Deaf or Hard of Hearing to important sounds.
- ▶ Facility dogs – visiting or residing an educational or health care facilities.
- ▶ Skilled companions – enhancing independence for children or adults with physical, cognitive, or developmental disabilities.

Regardless of what type of assistance any particular

dog will be providing, they must learn highly specialized skills, such as opening doors and drawers, responding to specific cues or sounds, and helping people put on or take off items of clothing. They must also be completely at ease in any and all settings and circumstances so they can be with their owners whenever and wherever needed.

CCI takes many steps to ensure dogs will have the "right stuff" to become a reliable assistant for the disabled. First, they carefully select and breed Labradors and Golden Retrievers; two breeds with inherent traits that make them ideal for the job. Once the puppies are whelped, they are cared for and nurtured for the first few weeks of life by volunteer breeder/caretakers.

Before the dogs can enter the specialized training program that will turn them into reliable assistants for the disabled, it is pivotal that they be raised through puppyhood in a way that will prepare them not only to learn complex commands and skills, but also to be consistent, trustworthy, and comfortable in any setting that they may encounter while in service. This is where volunteer puppy raising comes in – a critical phase of the process lasting about 15 months by which a successful assistance dog is developed. To ensure that a puppy grows up to be a capable assistance dog, volunteer puppy raisers are asked to:

▶ **Provide a safe, loving environment** – The first order of business for a volunteer puppy raiser is to provide it with good nutrition, grooming, veterinary care, and a safe, nurturing home environment.

▶ **Provide optimal socialization** – As with many species, there is a brief window of opportunity for puppies during which they learn to accept and adapt to the world around them. If puppies are underexposed to people, places, and things in the first few months of life, chances are high they will grow up to become timid, shy dogs. Shyness or timidity has no place in the lives of dogs who assist the disabled. They must be comfortable being with their human companion(s) in any setting. An important part of a volunteer puppy raiser's job is to provide optimal, age-appropriate socialization experiences for their charges. This involves exposing them to a wide variety of people (adults and children alike), equipment such as wheel chairs, elevators, and escalators, transportation vehicles, settings such as libraries, restaurants, and shops, as well as other dogs and cats.

▶ **Master basic obedience and "good manners"** – The two-year process of training an assistance dog begins in puppy hood, during his or her stay with a volunteer puppy raiser. To "prep" the puppy for more

advanced trainings, volunteer puppy raisers are asked to attend CCI-approved obedience classes to teach the puppy basic commands, such as sit, stay, lie down, and wait. These commands should be practiced in day-to-day life so they become second nature to the puppy.

Volunteer puppy raisers live with the puppy until the dog is between 15 and 18 months of age, at which point the dog is returned to one of the CCI facilities for advanced training and teaming up with a new owner. For the first two weeks after returning to the facility, the dog undergoes a medical and temperament evaluation to make sure that he or she is suitable for this next phase of training. Dogs who pass the screening then begin a 6-month period of training that exposes them to different environments and objects they are likely to encounter (e.g., wheel chairs), builds upon their obedience skills, and eventually teaches them to respond appropriately to over 40 different service commands, such as turning a light switch on and off and retrieving specified items. Throughout the training period, dogs are continually screened to make sure they truly have what it takes to become an assistance dog. Those who do are carefully matched based on temperament and skills aptitude, with a prospective new owner. Dogs and their prospective new owners then enter into a two-week phase of "Team Training", when new owners learn about caring for and handling their new dogs. CCI facilities provide dorms and living facilities where the owners-in-training stay

during this phase of the training. Once the new team has successfully completed the training and passed a public access test, they attend a graduation ceremony, during which the dog is officially turned over to its new owner.



Kim Efron and Tohru at Fiske Elementary School



Top, Tohru reading with Christine Maestri's kindergarten students at Fiske School. Below left, Tohru with Liora, Andrea, Sara & Kim. Below right, Tohru in his bed at Fiske School.

THE PATH THE LED TO TOHRU

Quite some time ago, when Kim was living in Santa Rosa, CA, she happened upon an article about a facility called Caring Canines for Independence that bred and raised assistance dogs for the disabled. The article mentioned that a graduation ceremony for the dogs and new owners would be taking place nearby where she lived. Out of curiosity, Kim decided to attend the ceremony. "It was very moving... there were tears, and laughter... I remember thinking: I am going to volunteer to raise one of these puppies someday," says Kim.

Fast forward 25 years. Kim's three daughters Liora,

Sara, and Andrea had recently been pleading with Kim to get a dog. Never having had a dog, Kim at first had reservations. They already had two cats and various other pets... how would a dog fit into their household? But then Kim remembered her experience attending the graduation ceremony at CCI. Kim, who always had a passion for helping other people, saw a potential opportunity here... what better way to be of genuine help to someone and satisfy her daughter's desire for a dog than to volunteer to raise a puppy for that wonderful organization she had learned about when she lived in Santa Rosa?

Kim couldn't quite recall the name of the organization, but a Google search quickly led her to the CCI website. Upon investigating the prospect of raising a puppy for CCI and discussing it with her daughters, she decided that now was the time to do what she had vowed to do 25 years before. In order to become a volunteer puppy raiser, there is an application and screening process to make sure prospective volunteers understand what they will be asked to do and are in a position to raise a puppy according to their specific criteria. Kim went through the process and was approved to become a volunteer puppy raiser for the CCI.

Kim and her daughters first met Tohru 18 months ago when they went to pick him up at Miller Family Center – a new CCI facility for training assistance dogs and their prospective new owners – in Long Island, New York. He was then a two-month-old little bundle of puppy love, ready to go to a home and begin the learning process of becoming an assistance dog.

"You are not alone in doing this," Kim comments. "CCI provides a lot of support and advice for volunteer puppy raisers. There are many other volunteers from all over the area... I know of people from Cambridge, Sudbury, Somerville, Chestnut Hill, and Amherst. For me, it's become a community of support and friendship."

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF TOHRU

What was a typical day like for Tohru, living with the Efron family? In the mornings, he was fed by Sara and walked by Liora. After breakfast and a walk, Tohru would go off to the Fiske School with Kim to spend the day "working" with the children there. Kim was fortunate enough to have garnered the cooperation of the school's principle and faculty in allowing Tohru to attend the school and participate in classroom activities. During any given day, he would sit quietly in the Kindergarten room listening as the children learn their ABCs, or be read to by first graders, or spend some quality time with the special needs children. In each classroom he visited, Tohru had a bed or a designated spot that he knew was his. He walked calmly through the hallways and in and out of rooms. Being allowed to go to school with Kim clearly provided a fantastic opportunity for Tohru to adapt to being around all kinds of activity and people.

But Tohru's social life was not limited to attending the school. He accompanied the Efron family to concerts (even in Symphony Hall!), swim meets, movies, and restaurants. He rode in cars and buses, and the subway. During his forays, Tohru was expected to behave appropriately and approach people only when given permission. This was to prepare him to know when he is "working" and when he is not. A working assistance dog must learn to pay attention to his person and his job when he is "on duty".

One may wonder how people react to seeing a dog entering a café, concert hall, or movie theater. "You have to do a lot of educating," says Kim. "Many people are unaware that there are laws mandating that service dogs, or service dogs-in-training, must be allowed in public places." When out "on the town", Tohru wore a special vest letting the public know that he is an assistance dog-in-training. Though some people protested, most, upon learning what Tohru is being trained to do in the future, were cooperative and supportive.

A question Kim has often heard from people is: *Does he ever just get to be a dog?* The answer is yes. At home, Tohru was allowed to be just like any other dog, rolling over on his back for pets, playing with his toys, doling out kisses, and playing soccer in the yard with Andrea. He will always have the chance to be a dog, for even working assistance dogs have their "down time" when they can play and be loved by their owners.

TIME TO SAY GOODBYE

Watching Kim and her daughters interact with Tohru, it was

Tohru, continued on page 40

evident that he had become an integral part of their lives and visa versa. He nuzzled Kim and the girls, who clearly love him, and contentedly plopped down on his bed with a toy. According to Sara, having Tohru has been "pure happiness".

But their time together ended on February 21, 2009. That's the day the Effrons took Tohru back to the Miller Campus to begin his advanced training. A lot of people may wonder how, after spending over a year with a puppy and being so committed to its care and training, one can give the dog up when it is time for them to enter into advanced assistance dog training.

"It wasn't easy," Kim admits, "The house seems so empty without him and

there are traces of him everywhere". But, despite how hard it was to say good bye and how deeply he is missed, Kim is keeping her focus on how much help Tohru will be providing to someone and what a difference it will make in his or her life. According to Kim, all one has to do is attend a graduation and witness the fully trained dogs being led to meet their new companions to understand the importance and rewards of being a volunteer puppy raiser for CCI. And, as sad as it was to part with Tohru, Kim and her daughters will be volunteering to raise a CCI puppy again this summer.

INTERESTED IN VOLUNTEERING TO RAISE A PUPPY

Canine Companions for Independence is always seeking qualified people to raise puppies for their organization. According to Kim, volunteer puppy raising for CCI is a wonderful, satisfying experience that gives you as much as you end up giving.

According to the CCI website, as a volunteer puppy raiser, you will be asked to:

- Provide a safe environment for a puppy who will be the only dog under 1-year old in the house.
- Work closely with CCI monitoring the puppy's progress and submit monthly reports.
- Attend CCI approved obedience classes.
- Teach the puppy manners and basic commands.
- Provide financially for the puppy's food, medical and transportation expenses.

- Feed the puppy a diet recommended by CCI.
- Provide a kennel or crate for sleeping indoors.
- Provide the puppy with age-appropriate socialization opportunities such as public outings and medical appointments.
- Keep the puppy on a leash at all times unless in a securely fenced area.
- Supervise the young puppy throughout the day.
- Agree to return the puppy upon request.

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer puppy raiser for CCI, you can learn more about the organization, its goals, and how to apply to become a puppy raiser by visiting <http://www.cci.org>.

BENEFITS BEYOND MEASURE...

In its February 2009 issue, the AKC Gazette ran a story on the CCI highlighting the profound difference a special dog named Taffy has made in a young girl's life. Taffy, a yellow Labrador Retriever, is a skilled assistance dog for a young girl with a congenital brain disorder. In this role, Taffy not only helps with practical tasks like opening doors and retrieving items, but also helps mitigate emotional travails of dealing with a difficult illness. For example, during a therapeutic regimen of steroids to treat her brain disorder, this young girl experienced severe psychosis as a side effect. Unable even to recognize her parents, her physician

summoned Taffy to come to the girl's side. She immediately recognized the dog, which helped ground her in reality and comfort her.

According to the article, Taffy's role as a source of emotional support is one shared by most other CCI dogs. While the practical assistance that CCI dogs provide is extremely helpful, it is emotional support and comfort that is considered the most priceless form of help that these dogs provide.

To read the full article in AKC Gazette, visit: <http://viewer.zmags.com/showmag.php?mid=wtgwr&spid=-3>