



Golden Retriever Gatsby helps Asher and her mom cope with a rare, debilitating disorder.

# Always

*Service dogs are changing the lives of very young people with disabilities.*

*By Jen Reeder*

# On Call

Virginia resident and mother of four Ka'ea Waldrop was busy with housework when a Golden Retriever named Gatsby burst into the room and began nudging her knee with his nose. Since Gatsby is a medical-alert dog for her 7-year-old daughter, Asher, she immediately went to the girl's bedroom.

"It had sounded to me like Asher was playing, but she was literally on the ground and choking," she recalls. "Gatsby was the only one in the house who knew about it."

That's just one way the service dog has helped Asher in their first year together. Gatsby can alert to a variety of medical issues arising from a rare condition that

doctors categorize as a mitochondrial disease. (Mitochondria provide a source of chemical energy for cells.)

"Her body has mitochondria. They just don't make enough energy for everything," Waldrop explains.

Asher has a feeding tube and is prone to muscle weakness and chronic fatigue. The brave, bubbly girl sometimes uses a wheelchair or faints.

"When your body runs out of energy, it tries to protect things. It'll make a kid randomly have a seizure to turn your brain off to give it some rest or it'll make you pass out," she says.

One of the main reasons the family wanted to get Asher a service dog was to help detect the onset of pain. It was

initially challenging to find a nonprofit that could provide a service dog for a neurotypical child under the age of 12, but Waldrop eventually found Eyes Ears Nose and Paws (EENP) in North Carolina.

The family qualified for a scholarship—"When you have a disabled child, there's no extra money"—and the nonprofit Canines for Disabled Kids secured them the final \$5,000 with a donation from the hard seltzer company Good Dogg Beverage.

Gatsby—who is serious and methodical while working and a goofy Golden whenever a ball comes out—proved life-changing. Even though Asher's symptoms change frequently, he can

COURTESY/CANINES FOR DISABLED KIDS

detect if she has a fever, is fatigued, or about to experience pain like a migraine. Then Waldrop can get medicine and provide care under Gatsby's watchful gaze.

"Asher used to pass out from pain a lot. But Gatsby does deep-pressure therapy where he lays across her lap, and that pressure keeps her with us. She's only fainted once," she says. "She's really been doing well since having him."

## Making the Connection

Like Asher, many children with disabilities benefit from having service dogs, according to Kristin Hartness, executive director of Canines for Disabled Kids (CDK), a national nonprofit that helps connect children up to 18 years old with service dogs.

"A number of families and children really benefit by having service dogs earlier in their life, whether managing seizures or diabetes or having an impact on autism," she says. "Service dogs work with people of almost all disabilities with a huge variety of skills."

Finding the right fit can be a challenge since there are vastly more service dog organizations for adults than children—and the groups might have age restrictions, specialize in certain disabilities, or have geographical requirements, like being a resident of a certain state. So CDK helps over 1,000 families each year find the best organization for their child's needs—for free.

The nonprofit also offers scholarships to help families obtain a service dog. Founded in 1998, the group discovered some organizations might accept a child into a program's waitlist at age 5 but make them wait until they were 10 or older to partner with a dog. So CDK started offering scholarships to nudge organizations to partner children with dogs sooner, and to be more transparent about wait times.

Today CDK works with around 200 groups, mainly nonprofit organizations. Many service dog organizations require



*Carriella Starnes at work with Astra, spreading the word about the value of a helping paw*

a facilitator (typically a parent) to be responsible for the dog, and some won't provide dogs for young children. Hartness says that's because reputable organizations know their strengths and weaknesses.

That might drive some families eager for a service dog to buy a dog and hire a private trainer, but Hartness notes that the success rate for such "owner-assisted training" is much lower than with service dog organizations.

"It will cost you between \$35,000–\$50,000 over a two-year period. You're risking yourself emotionally and financially," she cautions. "But if you work with a training organization, they will not let you meet a dog that's going to fail, no matter how many dogs they have to go through to get to your dog.

You're not raising additional money every time a dog drops out."

The main breeds trained in the service dog industry are Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, and crosses of the two—selected for skill, size, health, and temperament, according to Hartness. Standard Poodles are often used for children allergic to dander. Still, any breed can qualify as a service dog; her own service dogs have been smooth Collies.

She recommends choosing a dog because of its skills, not breed.

"You should always be looking for the tool that makes you more independent," she advises.

## The Perfect Partner

A service dog provided independence during critical teenage years to North



*Without the support of her service dogs Gaz and Astra, Starnes feared she might have been forced to give up activities she loved.*



*Selfie With a Savior: Starnes and her first service dog, Gaz, now retired and enjoying life as a beloved pet.*

Carolina resident Carriella Starnes. In 2013, she partnered with a diabetic-alert dog named Gaz, a Golden Retriever, at age 15 after receiving a scholarship from CDK.

“When I was a teenager, I was very active. I did color guard in the marching band. I was a competitive dancer, and I had gotten to the point where I wasn’t feeling my blood sugar drop anymore,” she says. “I wasn’t feeling those lows, which got to a scary point—especially when I was having lows overnight and I wasn’t waking up. Was I going to go into a coma overnight?”

Starnes considered stopping the activities she loved because she didn’t feel safe. Then she saw a TV story about a girl with a diabetic-alert dog and started researching service dogs. She found EENP and Gaz—who alerted

THIS PAGE COURTESY CARRIELLA STARNES

# Tips

for Finding a Reputable Service Dog Organization (and Avoid Getting Scammed)

Unscrupulous people sometimes prey on families through service dog scams—charging over \$10,000 for untrained, fearful, or aggressive dogs without the skills needed to increase independence for children with disabilities.

So research is paramount, according to Wallis Brozman, communications and advocacy coordinator for Canine Companions, a national service dog nonprofit founded in 1975 that provides free service dogs to children and adults. Brozman, herself a graduate of the program, shared these tips for finding a quality service dog:

- Look for organizations accredited by Assistance Dogs International ([assistedogsinternational.org](http://assistedogsinternational.org)).
- If an organization or trainer requires payment, find out what you're getting before you hand over any money. "Are you getting a fully trained dog? Are you getting an adult dog or a puppy? There have been incidents where people receive a dog and it's 6 months old and still in puppy stages."
- Find out if follow-up services are included.
- Ask if you will be trained in how to work with the service



dog. "There needs to be some sort of training component rather than, 'Here's a leash with a dog on the end.' "

- Make sure there's a plan in place if the dog doesn't work out.
- Walk away if someone offers a dog to guard or protect a child through aggression. "Protection work is not covered under the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act]," she cautions.
- Be clear about expectations of the tasks the dog will be able to perform. "I think the biggest piece of advice I could give is: Learn what's out there so you know what you're looking for. What's your primary need?"

For more information, visit [canine.org](http://canine.org).

on a change in her blood sugar the first time they met.

"He absolutely proved himself," she says.

Her public high school didn't want to allow Gaz to enter, so Starnes reached out to Hartness at CKD, who flew from Massachusetts to North Carolina to meet with the administration. (Another major component of CDK's work is educational outreach, from speaking at conferences to meeting with school administrators and police officers about service dogs and ADA access.)

Starnes credits Gaz with giving her

the independence to continue her activities and move away from home to attend college. Formerly soft-spoken, she learned to speak up for herself and her dog when strangers tried to pet him, or when businesses tried to bar them from entering.

Now 24, she works for CDK in client and event support because she's so passionate about helping other young people partner with service dogs. Gaz is now retired and living as a pet in her home; her active service dog is a Lab-Golden cross named Astra who helped her through a new health challenge and

applies deep pressure to help her body regulate its autonomic nervous system.

"I say it all the time: I wouldn't have my dogs if I weren't diabetic, and I wouldn't be where I am in life without my dogs," she says. **FD**

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*Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.*

*For more information, visit [caninesforkids.org](http://caninesforkids.org).*