



# Super Dogs

What if a service dog could change your child's life—but no one would give you one? One woman is placing service dogs with kids and, by doing so, making a world of difference for families

By Jen Reeder

The world is a better place because a dog saved Karen Shirk's life 15 years ago.

Shirk has always had a calling to help others. As a teenager, the Ohio resident spent time in the foster care system, so she wanted to help at-risk kids as an adult. She fostered children while she was a college student and worked in group homes and daycare centers for people with autism. At 24, she was in graduate school studying mental health and neurological disorders when she received a devastating diagnosis: she had a rare neuromuscular disease called myasthenia gravis. As some muscles stopped working, she needed to use a wheelchair and soon, a ventilator to help her breathe.

"I'd gone from a person who was working, going to school, fostering children, to nothing, basically," Shirk says. "It was not what my life was supposed to be."

Shirk applied to many organizations for a service dog to help with her mobility issues, but was repeatedly denied. She despaired when one group told her she wouldn't be given a dog because she used a ventilator. Due to the waitlist for service dogs, they told her, they had to prioritize people who had a better chance of reentering society. In the wake of that shattering news, a friend who hoped to give Shirk a reason to go on living insisted that she adopt a puppy on her own, forcing her out of bed and driving her to see a litter of black German Shepherd puppies. There she found Ben, and it was life changing.

"Once I got Ben, I had to do things. I started to get out and went to dog obedience class with him."



Karen Shirk, 4 Paws for Ability's  
Founder, with one of her Papillions

**“I don’t think I could tell you exactly what [our service dog] does for Ryan. I can just tell you without a doubt that Ryan’s a completely different kid.”**

Shirk attended classes with trainer Jeremy Dulebohn, who trained Ben for mobility assistance. Ben could open doors and drawers, get change from retailers, help Shirk remove shoes and socks, fetch a bottle of water from the refrigerator. The dog was not only smart but sweet.

“He was 136 pounds of sheer baby...he loved hamsters and bunnies,” she recalls.

Shirk started a new treatment that put her disease into remission; she regained the ability to breathe unassisted, and horseback riding helped rebuild some of her muscles so that she could walk again.

Then, in 1999, Shirk was recovering from open-heart surgery when her morphine pump malfunctioned. She slipped into unconsciousness and didn’t move when her phone started ringing—her father, who lived an hour away, was calling to check on her. Though Ben was trained to only answer the phone when Shirk gave a command, he picked it up and started barking incessantly. Shirk’s father realized something was wrong and called 911.

Thanks to Ben, Shirk survived her brush with death and after her health stabilized went on to adopt four children—her oldest son is named “Benjamin Aaron” in honor of her dog. She also worked to expand her nonprofit 4 Paws for Ability, which she founded in 1998 to help get service dogs to people other organizations might deem “too disabled” for a dog. To her surprise, she found that the most underserved group was children. While many organizations would give companion dogs to assist children in the home, they had age minimums in place for recipients of service dogs, preventing pairings with children. Since service dogs can go into public establishments like restaurants, shops, and schools, the fear was children would not prove competent handlers. But Shirk, having been denied a dog herself and possessing firsthand knowledge of how life-changing a service dog can be, refused to accept this; her organization would accept those rejected by the big agencies, granting a dog to anyone whose life would be improved by a dog provided they could take good care of one (parents serve as co-handlers/caretakers). Since inception, 4 Paws for Ability has awarded almost 800 dogs, most of them to children, and now places 100 to 120 dogs a year.

“I definitely don’t look at it as work,” Shirk says. “I love it.” ▶



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From left: Becky and her service dog Thule at Becky's Little League Baseball game; Ryan with his autism assistance dog Navin following a Scouts meeting; Justin and his autism assistance dog, Fern; Megan and Pip, her diabetic alert dog

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The nonprofit primarily serves children, though it also has a program for military veterans injured in the line of duty. 4 Paws dogs are mostly bred for the purpose, though some are shelter dogs and donated dogs. They are a variety of breeds and mixes, though Labradors, Golden Retrievers, German Shepherds, Papillons, Golden Labs, Poodles, Golden Doodles, Collies, and Newfoundlands top the list. Each dog gets 500 hours of training for assistance with autism, fetal alcohol syndrome, hearing and vision impairment, seizures, diabetes, food allergen detection, and mobility. (Dulebohn, who trained Ben, is the training director at 4 Paws.)

The 4 Paws team starts puppy socialization on the day they're born as part of the "Puppy Enrichment Program," and volunteers near the facility's base in Xenia, Ohio or the new branch in Anchorage, Alaska foster the puppies and breeding parents. Then, to lower costs and to speed up the training time, dogs are trained around the clock either by local college students or prison inmates. The college students foster the dogs for a school quarter and socialize the dogs by taking them to classes, sporting events, and sleeping with them in dorms.

"You can't get more socialization than on a college campus," Shirk says with a laugh.

The prison program teaches dogs basic obedience skills and

helps them learn to cope with stressful situations—inmates take the dogs to the mental health wings as part of socialization, which can be valuable if they are placed in a home where a child is prone to erratic behaviour. It also gives the prison offenders a sense of purpose and a reason to stay out of trouble so they can keep training dogs.

"It's just such a win/win situation," Shirk says. "The dogs get that one-on-one 24 hours a day, and the inmates, some of them for the first time in their entire life, get to do something good."

Shirk takes pains to be as inclusive as possible, so unlike some other organizations, 4 Paws will award dogs to families that live in apartments or have other pets. And dogs can be trained to cater to a family's specific needs as multipurpose assistance dogs.

Gina Rittinger's family traveled from Minnesota to Ohio in 2009 for the intensive two weeks of 4 Paws training required for pairing with the multipurpose assistance dog they were to receive. Fern, a yellow Lab, was trained as a diabetic alert dog for daughter Megan (now 11) and as an autism assistance dog for Rittinger's two sons, Jacob (Megan's twin) and Justin, now 13. Fern was trained for tracking, since at the time, both boys "would run a lot," and for behaviour disruption—if a boy gets upset, Fern applies "deep pressure" by leaning into or lying on top of them.

"It's amazing what these dogs can do," Rittinger says. ▶



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**"We'd been to three neurologists and no one ever told us this. We have a dog for two days and the dog alerts us to silent seizures, which we didn't know she ever had."**

Justin bonded quickly with Fern, playing with her and snuggling with her in bed at night. Because he can be anxious and fearful, he used to want to sleep in bed with his parents, but now he stays in his own bed.

"Fern provides a lot of emotional stability for Justin. When he gets upset, he relies on Fern to help calm him down," she says. "He can tell Fern things that he can't tell me ... it's a really nice safety net for him."

Fern also helped Jacob in public, where they would be tethered to one another to help keep the younger son from endangering himself by possibly bolting into traffic. But within a year, the dog began having seizures. The family couldn't bear to part with her, but her medications affected her ability to work as a diabetic alert dog for Megan, though she was still excellent as an autism assistance dog. Without prompting, 4 Paws offered to train a second dog free of charge as a diabetic alert dog (normally families must raise \$14,000 to prove their commitment and offset the \$22,000 - \$46,000 cost of each dog; 4 Paws assists with fundraising). That's how Megan got Pip, a little Papillon.

"Pip was alerting to Megan within a day or two of being at training," Rittinger says. "He's smart as a whip and right on with his diabetic alert."

Pip can sense when Megan's blood sugar is about to plunge or skyrocket out of normal range, sometimes 15 minutes to a half hour in advance, and is "persistent" about alerting Rittinger to be ready to either give her food or an insulin shot. Pip sleeps with Megan at night, and recently when her insulin pump failed, Pip woke up Megan, who then woke up her mom.

Rittinger says after six years, she and her family are still extremely happy with 4 Paws for Ability for providing such gifted dogs, and for being so caring about their animals and clients.

"I can't say enough about the training, how detailed it is, how comprehensive," she says. "They are wonderful to work with."

Florida resident Tom Penders was nervous to take the final handler exam at 4 Paws because getting a service dog for his daughter Becky, who is blind and has autism and seizures, was the "last hope" for his family. Becky's behaviour had become increasingly violent, and she would regularly attack her father, even knocking out his front tooth.

"We were at wit's end," Penders says. "The behaviour issues had gotten so bad by last September that I told my wife, 'If this dog doesn't work out, we're probably going to have to revisit the conversation we had about institutionalizing her,' because it was that bad."

Penders started training at 4 Paws with Thule, an English cream Golden Retriever; though children usually need to be present at the sessions so the dogs can learn to interact with them, Becky couldn't attend because she was having meltdowns every day. But the second night Thule spent with them in the hotel, he started seizure alerting to her, though she wasn't convulsing. Skeptical, Penders told his training class that Thule was "false alerting." One of his classmates asked, "Have you ever heard of nonconvulsive seizures, or silent seizures?"

"So we'd been to three neurologists and no one ever told us this. We have a dog for two days and the dog alerts us to silent seizures, which we didn't know she ever had." ▶



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**“There’s no way I could ever repay them for what they’ve done for us,” Penders said. “This is probably one of the biggest, most important things I’ve ever done for my child.”**

After the family returned to Florida with Thule, life drastically changed.

“It was like somebody flipped a switch on Becky,” he said. “The dog is so mellow and so calming—all the behaviour issues stopped as far as attacking.”

Thule alerts Becky’s parents not just to silent seizures but lets them know (by barking and tugging at their clothes) when she’s about to have a grand mal seizure (which causes loss of consciousness), so they can make sure she isn’t at risk of suffocation by lying face down on her bed, and to have medicine ready in case the seizure lasts several minutes. It also helps Penders and his wife Nell sleep at night since they don’t need to worry unless Thule has warned them to be vigilant.

Thule accompanies Becky to her baseball games—she plays in the Challenger Division of Little League Baseball—and has essentially become the team mascot. He also provides emotional and even physical support for her parents without prompting, alerting on Nell when she had a dizzy spell, and even pushing Tom into grocery shelves for support when he was about to pass out (he has diabetes), something for which Thule was not trained. He says Thule has become a family therapy and service dog and that the 4 Paws staff and parents, who support each other privately on Facebook, are a “big family.”

“There’s no way I could ever repay them for what they’ve done for us,” Penders said. “This is probably one of the biggest, most important things I’ve ever done for my child.”

Texas resident Chris (he requested his last name be omitted) says the intensive “doggie boot camp” and fundraising to get an autism assistance dog last year for his now 13-year-old son Ryan was more than worth it. Ryan is “sensory adverse” so he doesn’t like to be lightly touched, such as having his toenails clipped or hair brushed. Navin, a Golden Retriever, is trained for behaviour disruption when Ryan is upset—he’ll lie on top of the boy when he’s crying and kiss his face until he starts laughing. Thanks to Navin’s calming influence, Ryan can eat out at restaurants without having tics and cope with having his braces tightened.

Though the family (which includes wife Jane and daughter Sarah) has always had pets, Navin is the first one allowed on the furniture so that he can snuggle with Ryan while they watch TV together. Chris calls the Golden Retriever “absolutely a miracle.”

“If you put me on the stand and asked me to put my hand up, I don’t think I could tell you exactly what he does for Ryan. I can

just tell you without a doubt that Ryan’s a completely different kid.”

Ryan says he loves Navin.

“He’s a good boy. He makes me very happy around him.”

Ryan recently was able to talk to about 30 Cub Scouts and their parents about Navin’s work as a service dog, something that came as a wonderful surprise to his father.

“Four Paws has changed our lives,” Chris says. “They’re changing the world one family at a time.”

For more information, visit [4pawsforability.org](http://4pawsforability.org). ■



At Modern Dog, we’re big fans of 4 Paws for Ability. In fact, Modern Dog’s Connie Wilson (above with Purina’s Paul Cooke) selected them as the recipient of a donation Purina made in her name when she was named the 2014 recipient of Global Pet Expo’s “Excellence in Journalism and Outstanding Contributions to the Pet Industry Award.” (Yay Modern Dog!)

4 Paws for Ability is in the midst of a five-year fundraising campaign to raise \$3 million to repay a loan to triple the size of the existing Xenia, Ohio building so that they can train more dogs and, thus, change more lives. We’re super-proud to have made a contribution assisting them in this endeavour. For more on 4 Paws for Ability or to make a donation, go to [4pawsforability.com](http://4pawsforability.com).