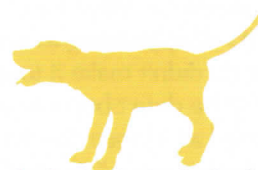


The Do Good Dog

"DogVinçi" inspires by painting from the heart for charity



In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

Photos by Liz & Phil McFarland

Ann, Dagger, and Yvonne.



The honor of ringing the New York Stock Exchange bell is often one of the biggest achievements in someone's life. But when a nine-week-old puppy named Dagger rang the bell in 2012, it was just the first of many remarkable accomplishments.

Dagger was bred by Canine Companions for Independence (CCI), a nonprofit that trains service dogs for people with disabilities. The 75 percent Lab/25 percent golden was named for longtime CCI volunteers Yvonne and Denis Dagger of Long Island, New York. When he was eight weeks old, they volunteered to be his puppy raisers.

"For eighteen months, we took him everywhere with us. He went to a Broadway show. He went to the library, the supermarket. Everywhere we went, we took Dagger so he could get socialized," Yvonne says. "We did see he had some fears. He was afraid to go down certain staircases – he would kind of bolt back, and he was afraid of the dark. He's a big, tall baby."

After Dagger left their home for advanced training with CCI, he continued to display fears that could put a handler in a wheelchair at risk. When the Dagers learned that he

would be released from the program, they jumped at the chance to permanently adopt him.

"As disappointing as it was to us that he didn't make it to graduation – that he didn't become a highly trained assistance dog for CCI – he had other plans," Yvonne says.

Those plans revealed themselves one day when Yvonne, a renowned artist who specializes in pet portraits, was painting in her studio and Dagger nudged her arm with his snout. "I jokingly said, 'Do you want to paint?' and his tail started to wag," she recalls.



Instead of laughing it off, Yvonne adjusted an easel to Dagger's height, put a canvas on the easel, and used the commands he'd learned in training, such as *push*. Like a good boy, Dagger pushed his nose on the canvas whenever asked. Yvonne taped a paintbrush to a long piece of wood; Dagger retrieved it on command and then pushed it onto the canvas.

His new career as "DogVinci" was born. Yvonne contacted Dagger's former CCI trainer, Lauren Ferraioli, who tutored him for several months with commands like *paint* (formerly

push) and *brush* (formerly *get*). She told Yvonne the dog was ready to try using actual paint, and he turned out to be a natural.

"When he saw the brush stroke he put on that canvas, he got so excited, I thought he was going to paint the walls," Yvonne recalls with a laugh. "He was running around with the paint brush in his mouth. A delightful, delightful day."

Dagger made his public debut as a canine painter at a "Paint and Sip" fundraiser for the nonprofit animal rescue group Forgotten Friends of Long Island. Unsurprisingly, his

painting demonstration was a hit with the 110 participants.

"They made the most money they'd ever made at a fundraiser, and everyone wanted to meet Dagger," she says.

Next, Dagger raised funds for CCI – anyone who made a \$50 donation through Team DogVinci got a free painting from Dagger. Then a newspaper story about Dagger went viral, and within two weeks, he had a whopping 150 commissions. Yvonne donates all of the profits to charities, including St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Foster Foundation (a supporter of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center), and the ASPCA. In two years, the dog has created 375 paintings and helped the Daggars give around \$30,000 to good causes.

Now Yvonne and Dagger have a painting routine at home. When she puts his red beret on his head, he knows it's time to work. She puts on one of their favorite music albums, and the other family dogs – Ya Ya (a Lab/golden mix) and Tommy Tutu (a beagle) – settle on the couch to watch. Yvonne sets out complementary shades of acrylic,

nontoxic paint, and Dagger takes the brush in his mouth and creates. (Aside from selecting the color choices, Yvonne doesn't "finesse" Dagger's artwork in any way.)

By the last song of the album – Dagger's favorite is Cathy Bolton's "Remember Who You Are" – Yvonne removes Dagger's hat because his work is done for the day. The other dogs jump off the couch to greet them before Yvonne sits on the floor to give them treats and tell Dagger what a good job he did painting – and what a good job the other dogs did watching. While she sings to them, Dagger rests his head on her shoulder while Tommy lays his head in her lap. "I always say it's just such a magical life," Yvonne says. "I live a fun life."


Dagger does so much to help others that Yvonne nicknamed him "The Do Good Dog." In addition to his fundraising, he volunteers as a therapy dog at nursing homes, and Yvonne created

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter pages for Dagger that share a positive thought and photo every day. Dagger gives painting demonstrations at libraries for children that proved so popular that librarians began requesting additional programs for teens and tweens. Typically, Dagger gives a painting demonstration and Yvonne educates the kids about abstract art – the older students learn about artist Wassily Kandinsky – and then they have a chance to create their own abstract art by "painting from the heart" like DogVinci.

"Part of Dagger's mission is not only the community service, volunteering as a therapy dog, and giving to charities, but also education," Yvonne explains. "We don't do birthday parties – he's not a clown act. He's a real, serious canine artist. I want that message to resonate."

Perhaps Dagger's greatest talent is his capacity for love. Ann Barile assists Yvonne and Dagger at library visits, which often have

around 25 participants. On her first day of volunteering to help, she privately worried that Dagger might not like his unusual job, but that concern vanished as soon as the students arrived.

"I'll tell you, that dog loves the kids. He couldn't wait for the kids to get in the room. His tail was wagging. It's that way every time," Ann says. "He just loves seeing them. He rolls over on his back so that he can get a belly rub and he doesn't lick. He's an exceptional dog." 

For more information, visit: DogVinci.com.



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a

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