



Milo & Chad: A life-changing friendship



Milo Vaccaro is an energetic, happy, 13-year-old boy who loves school, watching movies and hanging out with his older brother, Sasha. But life wasn't always like this for the teenager. In fact, the majority of his life has been a constant struggle, fraught with anxiety, frustration and unhappiness.

"Milo was diagnosed at a young age with autism spectrum disorder," says Claire Vaccaro, Milo's mom. "The first 10 years of Milo's life were incredibly difficult. Every hour of his day was a struggle as he tried to cope with the world around him. This made it very difficult for our family to do even the simplest of activities - go to the park or out to eat at a restaurant."

Claire notes. "I started researching online and was amazed and excited to find the organization, Autism Service Dogs of America."

Based in Oregon, Autism Service Dogs of America (ASDA) trains dogs to work specifically for children with autism. Rigorous training ensures the autism service dogs are not only prepared to accompany their owners in every social setting, but also to

Luboja were instrumental in our application for Milo," says Claire. "We brought Milo in on a Sunday and Liz brought her beautiful yellow lab Hopper and we filmed them together. I supplied that video to ASDA and they were able to see that Milo would be a good candidate."

Six months after applying, the Vaccaros received the good news that Milo was accepted into the program. Over the next year, the Vaccaros fundraised the required \$13,500 while Chad was trained at the ASDA headquarters in Oregon.

"After many months of waiting, training with Chad on site in Oregon and completing a series of examinations, we finally got to bring Chad home on Milo's eleventh birthday - March 30, 2009," says Claire. "While we were thrilled at the time, we had no idea how much Chad would change our lives forever."

Claire says she noticed a change in Milo's mood and behavior immediately. No longer as anxious, everyday tasks such as waking in the morning, getting ready for school and taking the bus became easier and more enjoyable with Chad by his side.

Initially faced with opposition from Milo's school over the idea of Chad's constant presence, the Vaccaros found a new school for Milo to grow and flourish, Long Island's Gersh Academy. Developed and designed for children with autism spectrum disorders and related neurobiological disorders, the school welcomes Milo and Chad with open arms and even runs therapeutic programs for students to interact with other animals, such as horses.

"Milo has made more progress than anyone ever thought was even imaginable," says Claire. "I am so proud of him and his accomplishments and am so grateful that my son is getting to live the full, rich life he deserves thanks to our beautiful and gentle autism service dog, Chad. Chad has made Milo accessible to learning, connecting, having fun, laughing and growing emotionally."



Photo credit: Melanie Weiner

How an autism service dog impacted the lives of the Vaccaro family forever

After years of working with different therapists, doctors and teaching aids who would move on to other jobs or opportunities just as Milo was beginning to make progress, Claire realized Milo needed a constant companion in his life - someone who would be by his side at all times, helping him transition to different activities and environments throughout the day.

"As soon as I started to think about this, I realized a service dog would meet that need,"

protect them from harm at all times.

While Claire was convinced that an autism service dog was the answer for her son's daily struggles, her family first had to be accepted into the program. As part of the lengthy application, Claire had to submit a video of Milo interacting with an animal. She turned to Dr. Farber, DVM and Chief of Staff at West Chelsea Veterinary and her long time veterinarian.

"Dr. Farber and Hospital Manager Elizabeth

Service dogs enriching lives of Americans

Service dogs, most often golden retrievers and Labradors, are dogs trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability, including impaired hearing or vision, physical challenges and neurobiological disorders such as autism. As stipulated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, service dogs are permitted to accompany their owners in all public places, such as shopping malls, restaurants and airplanes.

As a growing number of people have recognized the physical, emotional and social benefits of service dogs, there are now hundreds of non-profit organizations responsible for training service dogs for those

in need. Many Americans are even choosing to train their own dogs to suit their individual needs.

For more information, visit these sites:

- www.servicedogsamerica.org
- www.servicedogsforamerica.com
- www.certifymydog.com
- www.scdoa.org (Service Companion Dogs of America)
- www.americanservicedog.com
- usservicedogregistry.org



AUTISM SERVICE DOGS OF AMERICA

Founded in 2002, ASDA has helped dozens of families with autistic children. Starting at seven weeks old, autism service dogs go through rigorous training to learn how to act appropriately in all social settings, how to be tethered to their owners and how to protect their owners in times of distress. Each dog goes through about 18 months of training, which costs about \$20,000. For more information, visit:

www.autismservicedogsfofamerica.com

