

Leading the way

JULIE never goes anywhere without her Prince. He opens and closes doors for her, picks up whatever she drops—and she's always dropping things—switches on lights and lifts telephone receivers and hands the wallet to the cashier when she shops.

Julie, 25, has muscular dystrophy, and lives in a wheelchair. Prince is her golden retriever. He means she can work, as a travel agent in California, where dogs have been trained to help not just blind but also disabled people.

Vaughn used to work on a dairy farm in a labouring job. He had a motorcycle accident and broke his neck, and now he has no strength in his legs or hands. 'It was embarrassing having to ask people to do things for me. With Cole, it's like being normal again. I can go to business school and I don't have to depend on other people.'

'Getting Duke was more than just getting a dog,' says 56-year-old Irene, disabled in a road accident, of her poodle. 'It was like getting myself back.'

These cases come from the US and Holland, the two countries so far with such schemes. Now, Assistance Dogs for Disabled People (ADDP) is being set up here as a new charity, nearly 60 years after the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association was started in Britain. (Dogs' good works were extended in 1982, with Hearing Dogs for the Deaf.)

The dogs—usually specially bred golden retrievers or labradors—will be trained to react to 90 commands.

The idea was pioneered in 1975 by Californian Bonita Ber



In National Pet Week, news of dogs for disabled people.

gin, an ex-teacher, who had travelled widely in Asia and Turkey, and observed handicapped people getting around quite independently with the aid of mules and donkeys.

Experts mocked her suggestion of replacing mules with dogs, but in 1976 she and Kerry Knause, a quadriplegic with Oppenheimer's Disease, successfully trained Abdul, a labrador puppy. Now her organisation—Canine Companions for Independence—has placed hundreds of dogs with handicapped people all over the US.

CCI inspired the Dutch scheme, the SOHO Foundation, whose trainer, Hugo Baardman, spent a year working in the US. Now ADDP plans to send its trainer to Holland.

'We hope to be able to offer the first dog to a disabled person about two years after the charity is officially launched, which should be about midsummer,' says Anne Conway, founder member and Secretary of ADDP. (The scheme's applica-

tion is with the Charity Commissioners.) She is also involved in the Pat Dogs and Cocker Rescue schemes, and an animal ambulance service specialising in swans, from her home in Hampshire.

'The dogs we'll be providing will be carefully selected at birth by specially designed tests,' Anne explains, 'and then at seven to eight weeks they'll be put out to foster homes for puppy-walking. During this time they'll be constantly assessed and attend obedience training classes. Then at 15 months they begin six months of advanced training—by the usual reward and repetition.' The dogs can be trained to react to 90 commands.

Another benefit dogs provide is a link with the community. Research by Lynette Hart at the University of California has shown that people in wheelchairs are more than three times as likely to be approached in a friendly way if they have a dog with them. Using two groups, with and without dogs, Hart found that the group with dogs received smiles from 18 per cent of passers-by and had conversations with 7 per cent, compared with smiles from 5 per cent and chats with 2 per cent for the dogless.

And then, of course, there is love and companionship. 'When you're disabled it's hard to make lasting friendships unless people knew you before,' says Irene in a demonstration video. 'But Duke will be a lot of company for me. I'll no longer be alone.'

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