

At the top, the dog would bound ahead so the woman could steady herself using his back while stepping off the moving stairway. If you were still around after young Kayla had acquired a new pair of sneakers in the third-floor children's department, you might have seen the same routine in reverse.

Sure, they could have used the elevator. But Susan Duncan, whose mobility is threatened by multiple sclerosis, pushes new frontiers with her service dog, Joey.

Dogs aren't expected to handle escalators. Nor are they known to do laundry. Joey does both, and many other things.

Duncan calculates that after less than 10 months' training, the dog recognizes 102 verbs and nouns, which she combines into different commands.

Canine workhorse

As she is only 5 feet tall, Duncan can lean on Joey's back for support, enabling her to minimize use of a wheelchair. He pulls her up stairs and braces her going down, helps her up when she falls and lifts her from the swimming pool. He can open and close the refrigerator door, shut off the dishwasher and retrieve dropped objects. He carries groceries in his pack.

"At the Puyallup Fair, without Joey I might have been flat on my face from people bumping into me," said Duncan. "Several times the crowd jostled the cane from my hand, and Joey almost automatically picked it up and gave it

back to me."

After only seven months of training Joey, Duncan was confident enough to take him to Disneyland last summer. Her husband, Tom, stayed home in Bellevue while Duncan drove south with the dog, their two young daughters and a sitter.

"Joey went on rides with us, everything but the roller coaster," Duncan recalled. The fierce-looking dog cut a swath through crowds, located the girls when they strayed from Duncan's sight, "and he always remembered where our van was parked, after I had forgotten."

"He and I were alone when I pulled his water dish from my pack and inadvertently let loose a whole package of paper napkins to litter the area. Joey began to pick them up, one at a time, bringing each to me."

"A man behind us was watching, wondering how long this would go on. I think Joey would eventually have picked up every one if the man hadn't finally intervened to help."

Walking the dog

At home, Duncan takes Joey everywhere. The dog's presence allows her to take walks in a nearby park and, if she tires, to take a brief rest leaning against him. With a dog like Joey, Duncan doesn't fear muggers.

"When we go to the Bathhouse Theater, we're greeted with, 'Hi, Joey, we saved you a place!' He has his own spot where he sits quietly — even when there's a dog on stage."

Joey is not a specially bred, professionally trained animal but a formidable-looking 4-year-old stray whose time was running out when he met Duncan at the Humane Society.

Duncan had little dog-training experience. She was still grieving for Casper, a mixed-breed companion, when a society volunteer

Shaky start

The beginning was not promising. Joey frequently broke loose, streaked out the door, vaulted over the backyard fence or dug under it. "Once as he burrowed out," Duncan said, "I grabbed his tail and hung on, thinking OK, if it breaks, it breaks. Another time he got stuck and Merrin, my 11-year-old, pushed while I puffed to get him out."

But from the start, Joey showed some basic instinct that could serve Duncan well. "When I'd fall, he'd come to help me up," she said.

gentle, intelligent animal.

whim reaping dogs and the firing of blanks.

Throughout the commotion, Joey remained calm. "This was my sign he was going to be OK," said Duncan. "I realized this was a very cool dog."

She took him through obedience training with Larry and Dana Babb at the Humane Society. The Babbs, who have a dog-training business in Renton called Paws-Abilities, encourage people to train their own dogs to be helpers, noting that organizations that breed and train dogs for disabled people have long waiting lists.

"While it helps to love dogs and want a dog, this also can be a learned experience," Dana Babb said. "Not everyone can, like

ber and they shed," she says. "Your housekeeping won't be perfect."

"To train a dog, you need time and patience, and you have to have faith that 'I can do this,' and that 'the dog can do this.' And you have to realize that however a dog is trained, it's never just over, period. You have to stick with the training and reinforce it continually."

Duncan, a registered nurse, feels it's important to educate the public about how dogs can help in dealing with disabilities.

"Joey helps me be independent," she said. "He helps me conserve energy — so I can feel like a human being at the end of the day."



Joey picks up can of food that slipped from Susan's hands at the grocery store.

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