

HEALTH/WELFARE

SERVICE DOGS IN JAPAN

Canine partners to the handicapped

By AKIKO FUKAMI

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Considering the two-room apartment, Bruce seems a rather over-sized choice for a pet. To Reiko Chiba, however, Bruce is much, much more. "He is a part of my body. A real partner," she says warmly, patting him on the back.

A dark brown Chesapeake Bay retriever, Bruce is Japan's one and only dog trained to help physically disabled people like Chiba, who is confined to a wheelchair, her hands paralyzed. Bruce was given to Chiba by the Philadelphia-based group Independence Dogs Inc. which trains "service dogs" to help handicapped people in many ways.

Partners for more than two years, Chiba and Bruce are now inseparable. Chiba feeds Bruce, brushes his fur and takes him for walks. In return, Bruce acts as Chiba's hands and legs: He can turn the lights on and off, bring the newspaper, pick up the telephone and even open the refrigerator, pull out a drink and bring it to his partner.

Most importantly, Bruce has been instrumental in encouraging Chiba to feel she too can have a life of her own. "I want more people to know how the companionship of a dog can make life wonderful for them," she says.

For this purpose, Chiba established Pātonā Doggu wo Sodateru Kai, a group that trains and provides dogs like Bruce to handicapped people in Japan. The group began its training program in June, and the first domestically trained partner dog is scheduled to debut next spring.

Chiba discovered the positive effect of animals on handicapped people a year after coming to Tokyo from her native Aomori. Having lived with her parents until she was over 20 years old, Chiba had a



CHESAPEAKE BAY RETRIEVER Bruce lies at the feet of Reiko Chiba, who has established Japan's first group to train and provide service dogs to the handicapped. YOSHIKI MIURA PHOTO

hard time establishing her independence. "I couldn't even go to the bathroom by myself," she recalls. Every day, Chiba spent an hour going to the toilet, three hours bathing and two hours preparing and eating her meals. One time she fell off her wheelchair and had to lie shivering on the cold floor until a helper came for a regular visit the next morning.

One day, the helper brought Chiba a kitten named Hime. Though she didn't expect to look after Hime for more than

a week, her presence became something there was no substitute for.

"Hime taught me that someone like myself, more likely to get help than give help, can experience the joy of providing food and water, even if only for a little kitten," she wrote in a leaflet introducing her group.

The turning point for Chiba was seeing a television program about the activities of Independence Dogs Inc. Inspired, she decided to make it her life's work to start and de-

velop a similar program in Japan. With the help of friends and volunteers, she collected enough money to fly to Philadelphia and visit the association.

In the U.S., Chiba was impressed by the prevailing attitude, reflected in the commuting system, which encouraged handicapped people to be more independent. "Until then, my image of a person in a wheelchair was that there was always someone behind steering it and that that was the only way it could move. But in the States, I learned that I could move on my own and go wherever I wanted." Chiba returned with a self-confidence she may not have discovered in Japan and soon after received Bruce from the association.

She says it took her and Bruce about a year to really get to know each other. "There were times when he wouldn't stop barking and I wondered why I ever got him," she recalls. But once she understood that the dog was not a robot but a real animal, the relationship began to improve.

The benefits of living with a dog are many. In order to satisfy the animal's basic needs, the handicapped person must "think and come up with different ways to move around — things he or she never would have learned at rehabilitation centers."

In addition, the dog's presence sparks the interest of strangers and provides a starting point for conversation. As a result, the handicapped person is encouraged to get out and interact, a real psychological boost.

The group now has the support of 360 members and 15 volunteer workers, including a professional trainer educated at Independence Dogs Inc.

To receive a partner dog, recipients must specify what kind of help they need from