

**Q When was TOP DOG established, and who was involved?**

**A** The organization was founded by Stew Nordensson, Mary George, Lydia Kelley, Kathy Hurst, and Diann Belleranti. They had all worked at another dog-training organization, which they left because they didn't agree with its methods, which sometimes involved forceful correction. They felt there was a better way, plus they wanted to focus specifically on helping people with physical disabilities train their own service animals. This was especially important to Stew. He had cerebral palsy and a severe speech impediment, and he'd been confined to a mental institution for more than two decades because everyone thought he was mentally disabled. Once he got out he realized that he needed a service animal, and he decided to train it himself. He soon learned that positive reinforcement was the most productive training method. So that's when the five co-founders sat down around a table at Stew's house and decided to develop their own program. They started working on it in 1987, and the first class consisting of 11 teams was held in 1988.

**Q Could you explain the team approach TOP DOG utilizes?**

**A** The team is made up of the dog and its owner. The members of our staff don't train the dog, although they're qualified to. They teach the owner how to train the dog, which results in a deep bonding experience. It begins when someone applies to enter the program. If they don't have their own dog we'll help them locate one through a rescue service. We interview both the disabled individual—who must submit their doctor's approval—and the dog to get a sense of their compatibility, and also whether the dog meets our criteria. That includes the dog being at least one year old, and it must be spayed or neutered. We do not accept every dog, and we take things like temperament and size into account. Once the

team has been accepted they start with the beginner's class, which is followed by the intermediate and advanced classes. The beginner's class involves basic obedience training, like allowing the person in the wheelchair to go through a doorway first, and not to pick up any kind of food until they've been released to do so. That class is held once a week for three months, at which point all the teams are evaluated before they can graduate to the next level. Some don't, and they have to repeat the beginner's class. Those who do graduate begin the three-month intermediate class, where the service exercises begin. That involves everything from picking up dropped objects and turning room lights on and off to retrieving the phone and helping the person get dressed and undressed. The dogs are issued backpacks so they can accompany their master to the store or carry their books to school, and they wear an apron on their backs that identifies them as a service animal in training. The dog is also taught to brace, or stiffen, in case someone needs help rising from their wheelchair or even pulling themselves up if they've fallen down. So you can imagine how critical the intermediate class is in turning a regular dog into a specially trained service animal.

**Q What does the advanced class involve, and what does it lead to?**

**A** The advanced class involves fine-tuning everything that's been learned in the previous two classes and the teams remain in that class until they're ready for certification. We assign professional evaluators who have never met the team they're working with. They watch the team perform basic routines and accompany them to their home, as well as public places such as airports, restaurants, schools, colleges, and their place of employment. Once they've passed the evaluation the team receives their certification—not the owner, or the dog, but the team. This is a laminat-



ed photo ID card that is very useful should a restaurant or hotel refuse to let the team enter, because that's against the law. We've even had instances where apartment complexes have initially refused to lease space to a physically disabled person and their service animal, and that's when the certification—along with our intervention—really comes in handy. We require recertification every three years, and we also ask that a person begin training a new dog as soon as the old one begins losing its abilities due to age or illness. That's difficult, but you've got to enter into this with the realization that dogs just don't live as long as people do.

**Q What does this cost?**

**A** We are a nonprofit organization, so we're funded primarily through grants, but we do require a \$100 entry fee. But that includes all training materials, and it also allows the person to repeat each class a certain number of times. We also offer online training, with a site visit required for the certification process, and our training manuals and DVDs are available on our Web site. So we really are trying to reach out to people in every way we can, because this is a relationship that can really change a person's life, and the dog's as well. ☺

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