

THREE PERSPECTIVES/ONE SERVICE DOG: THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

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This narrative focuses on the impact of an assistance dog (Indy) from three perspectives. The first section describes how Indy contributed to major changes in Amy's life. The second section expands on this transformation from the perspective of Amy's mother. The final section uses Amy's experiences to support the importance of Animal-Assisted Social Work.

Amy's Story

I hate to think about my life before Indy came; it's an understatement to say that I was painfully lost. Like many others, I began to experience mental illness during my early teen years and struggled to cope. I'd try "sticking my toe in the water" when it came to school or an activity but immediately drew back when the slightest feeling of being overwhelmed washed over me. Even when it was something pleasant, such as cake decorating, I got cold feet. I was happy to wander around the shop owned by the cake decorating school and marvel at cakes, icing, and decorative cake toppers. However, when it came time to take a class, you could count me out. The same went for multiple failed attempts at community college. I was just one big bundle of nerves that all the medication and therapy in the world couldn't possibly unravel.

I had been reading online about psychiatric service dogs and decided plain and simple that I needed one. And so began the process of getting Indy. A phone call went in to a lovely private trainer and a year later Indy was partnered with me for good. I had no idea the extent to which I had turned my life upside down, but I was about to find out.

As an anxious person in public, I always felt as if the world were staring at me, and not in a good way. Indy instantly changed that. Wherever I went with him, I felt as though the world were smiling at us. His loyal companionship alone was enough to help my depression subside and together we made a fabulous team. Not long after being together,

my needs began to change. From a psychiatric standpoint I was stable but increasingly experiencing many medical issues. Indy slowly began responding to my medical issues one by one by one. And one day I realized that I no longer had a psychiatric service dog—I now had a medical alert dog. My joints are fragile and dislocate easily, leaving me with a propensity to fall. Indy protects me in public by circling me so nobody can knock me over. If I do fall he'll run and get help, going back and forth between me and the nearest person. In my home he's now trained to dial 911 if there is an emergency. He also alerts me to curbs, cracks in the sidewalk, or uneven ground so I don't fall and get injured.

Without being aware of it, Indy has opened many doors for me. He has been my inspiration to make another attempt at college.

Amy's Mother's Story

I am a Ph.D. clinical psychologist who learned as much from one small dog as from 30 years of writing, teaching, and practicing. My youngest daughter, Amy, truly succumbed during her adolescent years to the challenges of coping with a neuromuscular disorder, the concomitant pain, and the depression that resulted from not keeping pace with her academics, her peers, or even daily life. Naturally, I sought help from my own field, that of mental health. Years ensued of medication trials, misguided professional help, hospitalizations, psychotherapy, cognitive/behavioral therapy, support groups, alternative treatments, and one (yes, just one) fabulous

psychiatrist. One day this exhausted mother overheard Amy on the phone discussing the availability of a service dog. "Absolutely no," I asserted, "I cannot possibly take care of a dog on top of all the other things I do." Undeterred, Amy continued her conversation and offered payment from money she had saved. Thus began the process of bringing a service dog into her life.

A dog was located, a small, three-month-old Cardigan Corgi that I met when he first traveled through our home town on his way to live for the next year with his trainer. Upon meeting him (he had yet to have a name), I immediately said that he was most unattractive and that I did not want a male dog, to which the trainer responded, "This is not about choosing a pet. This is about Amy and the right dog for her." Having been justly put in my place, I quieted and over the next year drove Amy to her training sessions over four hours away. I watched, fascinated, as the two of them worked together on the tasks agreed upon as the necessary ones for Amy's needs. Then the day arrived when Indy was to come for good. Amy was up, dressed, and eager to head for the airport. I have to admit that I felt some excitement too but it was barely peeking out of layers of foreboding and worry as to what I was now taking on in the way of extra responsibilities.

Thus arrived Indy, who now had a name. I later learned that his name was decided upon because he was born on the Fourth of July and also because he would be bringing my daughter her independence. Being a trained service dog, Indy had tasks he specifically knew how to perform to benefit Amy. These included circling around Amy to keep people from crowding her and thus knocking her over, seeking help in the event of a fall, arousing her in the morning, comforting her during depressive episodes, and using the phone if necessary to call for help. Some of these are psychiatric service dog tasks, a relatively new field, which are explained by Joan Froling in a paper available from the International Association of Assistance Dog Partners (Froling, 2003).

Indy came as a trained psychiatric service dog. He was to help my daughter feel safe

going out in the world; less afraid of being pushed, shoved, or taking a fall; less humiliated by the stares of others; and less lonely given his presence by her side. Yes, Indy provided all of these but there is no theory or model to explain the growth of the human spirit that came out of the Amy-Indy relationship, the remarkable human-animal connection. Indy brought so much more than his ability to perform these tasks. He brought hope for a future, a purpose in life, and devotion beyond just our love for Indy but extending to all dogs providing service, therapy, and companionship for humans. I was there as a quiet observer as Amy ventured out in the world with Indy by her side. The sternest of people looked down and smiled, others stopped to ask questions, children shouted out with delight, and babies stopped crying as they pointed and said, "doggie" or "*pero*." Mothers pushing frantic infants and toddlers in their strollers looked at Amy and Indy with thanks and relief. Indy quite frankly brought joy, contagious joy, to everyone around him. Yes, the feelings of others can impact our mood. When someone is happy, you experience more happiness. Indy was an alert, engaging, and pleasing dog. Amy's mood soon matched Indy's. With joy, which had long been missing in her life, came energy and determination. At first it was by connecting with those who made and supplied service dog equipment. Many of them were disabled and she not only heard their personal stories but also met people equally enthusiastic about service dogs and equally or more disabled. She began making cards, brochures, and educational tools; wherever she went when questions were asked, she had information to provide. When stores, restaurants, or businesses denied access, rather than responding angrily, she paused and took the time to explain the role of a service dog and, most of all, the rights of a service dog. Amy read voraciously and soon knew an extraordinary amount about the selection, training, and rights of service dogs.

Feeling better herself, she decided to enroll in college and when asked to declare a major, she said that she would like it to be in the human-animal connection field. "What?" her major advisor said, "That is not a legitimate

field for academic pursuit." Undeterred, she advocated for herself and for Indy as well. She was told that this major would not even be a consideration unless she located a professional advisor teaching in an accredited liberal arts university who could offer her course work in such a field. Amazingly, serendipity played into her life, and the *Alumni Magazine* from The University of Denver arrived in my mailbox a few days later. Inside was a wonderful feature article about a new program at the Graduate School of Social Work in the human-animal connection field headed by Philip Tedeschi. What were the chances, I thought, that the head of a graduate school program would be willing to assume the role of professional advisor for a depressed young adult who was just embarking on a bachelor's degree? Amy was enthused like I had not seen for years, encouraging me to at least reach out and ask. Oh my, I thought, would Philip consider her request to study this field, to convince his college of the worthiness of this endeavor, to mentor and support her? Amy, who had lived in a world of disappointment and rejection, was urging me on. "Mother, you always told me it never hurt to ask, so please try." I wrote to Philip. I knew what the workload entails at a university as I was once a member of a psychology faculty, a member who dreaded, due to being overworked, just one more student asking me to sit on a dissertation committee or read a paper or supervise a field placement. This time I was the one on the opposing side of that feeling of dread. I was the one hoping beyond hope that this faculty member would say "yes." And indeed Philip said "yes." The most wonderful "yes" I had heard following years of mental health professionals saying that my daughter has "treatment-resistant depression" or "there is nothing more to try" or "the pharmaceutical companies are working on new drugs all the time."

Three years have now passed with the most fabulous stewardship, tutelage, mentoring, and support imaginable from Philip. Amy's degree is within reach; she will graduate in a year. But this human-animal connection forged something more precious than a college degree—through it Amy found purpose.

Through course work, research, and multiple connections to people in the service-dog field, she developed advocacy presentations and educational programs for school-aged children to learn about the inclusion of children with disabilities. Most of all, Amy's life became meaningful.

All of this unfolded because of a little dog that walked off an airplane one cold winter day accompanied by a skilled trainer. A dog trained to perform specific tasks to relieve depression, to provide comfort, and to assist in the event of a medical crisis created a climate of hope, purpose, and meaning. Where, might I ask, do any of us find that in life? Sometimes in the most unexpected of places—an emotional space that evolved from a human-animal connection that no psychological theory can explain. Yet Philip can explain, as he knew of this special connection and believed enough in its power to bring such a program to a university, assuring that many more would thrive as have Amy and Indy.

Philip's Story

Dogs are the best people. And as it plays out here at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work, we are learning a lot about how to be better people, better listeners, more accepting, and truly non-judgmental based on our exposure to the human-animal bond.

Amy and Indy's story represents the power of the human-animal bond in its most powerful element. For Amy, the steady, uncomplicated, yet reliable relationship with Indy was a critical and missing element that is difficult, if not impossible, to reproduce in human terms. The fact that this relationship is so profound to her is an example of the observable power of the human-animal bond.

The relationship between people and animals holds a unique meaning to the field of social work. These powerful connections have been formalized into the academic program at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work. This is the first program of its kind that allows graduate students to receive training and specialized skills for the inclusion of animals in a social work setting. The popularity and power of this approach has now

resulted in the expansion of the program into the Institute for Human-Animal Connection. The program exposes students to best practice and ethical guidelines for Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) and Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT).

The strong emergence of these programs is based primarily on the reliable beneficial effects that animals have on human health, well-being, and motivation. These notable effects can be demonstrated across age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and life condition. Images of animals appear in literature of all kinds, art, celebrations, dreams, fables, folklore, language, medicine, music, religion, work, and recreation. Animals themselves can be found in nearly every aspect of life. Also referred to as Pet-Assisted Therapy, Pet Therapy, Animal-Assisted Therapy, Human-Animal Bond, Human-Animal Interaction, and Animal-Assisted Activities, current literature supports a broad range of applications and approaches for motivational, educational, recreational, and therapeutic benefits to enhance quality of life in a variety of social work settings.

Fundamentally, this therapeutic approach brings a specifically selected animal and person together. Depending on the wide range of individual needs of the person and differing therapeutic settings, the type of animals and applications may vary significantly. There are companion animals, service animals, and therapy animals and applications offered through visiting, inpatient residential, and outpatient approaches. Small, medium, and large animals, domesticated and non-domesticated, may participate. Specially trained animals may assist persons with specific limitations and disabilities, such as seizure alert dogs. Animal-Assisted Social Work (AASW) is used effectively with older clients dealing with transition to elder care settings, loneliness, loss, depression, grief concerns, and end-of-life issues and with adults in a variety of situations and settings including homelessness, substance abuse, and corrections. Disabled and isolated adults, such as those dealing with AIDS and other chronic and debilitating medical conditions, have found the inclusion of animals to be highly

therapeutic. Animals offer multiple levels of support for their human companions. For example, service animals assist with mobility and other functional needs but also serve as best friends, companions, and a social lubricant within a judgmental world. They are widely used in many differing capacities for child development and socialization, attachment problems, and empathy development and in special and public school settings to improve attendance and participation—even reading, speaking, and writing abilities. AASW has been used effectively with disruptive behavioral issues, Attention Deficit Disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders, trauma and abuse issues, depression, anxiety, relationship problems, and communication needs. Integrating animals into social work can develop and enhance non-verbal communication, assertiveness and confidence, creative thinking and problem solving, leadership, work effectiveness, taking responsibility, risk-taking, teamwork, social skills, confidence, and attitude.

The human-animal bond can be difficult to define, even harder to measure, impossible to place a value on, and yet it occurs in our relationship with our animals in millions of people's homes every day.

Reference

- Froling, J. (2003). Service dog tasks for psychiatric disabilities. International Association of Assistance Dog Partners. Retrieved January 9, 2009 from www.iaadp.org/psd_tasks.html.

Philip Tedeschi, MSSW, LCSW, coordinates the Animal-Assisted Social Work Certificate program at the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work where he is an Assistant Clinical Professor. The Institute is the only academically based program in the U.S. for the training of professionals in the clinical application of animals to human health and mental health. In addition, he is a clinical consultant to the American Humane Association.

Carla Garrity, Ph.D., is a child clinical psychologist in private practice at the Neuro-

Developmental Center, an inter-disciplinary practice in Denver, for the assessment and treatment of children. In addition, she develops interventions to prevent bullying and is the co-author of *Bully-Proofing your School* as well as numerous books in the divorce field. Carla is mother to Amy.

Amy Garrity is currently completing her undergraduate studies at DePaul University. She lives with her service dog Indy and together they do educative and advocacy work for organizations supporting the value of service dogs. Comments concerning this article can be sent to ptedesch@du.edu.



Indy. Photograph by Amy Garrity.

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