

# Substantial Disruption



## Why God Made Dogs

By Mike Tully

Nothing can ruin a good evening at dinner like dropping your credit card on the floor. You know what comes after the moment of card/floor impact. You will perform a yoga move in your chair or booth and try to clamp your fleshy pincers around a card the thickness of a hair. This column is written from the perspective of a fingernail challenged male, but I suspect that longer nailed males and females also find it interesting to lift a VISA card from a tile floor. And, as you fumble for the card, you realize you can't look up because you will appear to be a peeping tom sneaking a glance under other tables. By the time you sit up again, card in hand, your hair will be tousled, your head will be swollen and red like a beet and the waitress will have swallowed her gum keeping from laughing.

That's about as good and bad as it gets for most of us. Imagine, however, what it is like to drop a credit card when one is confined to a wheelchair. Disabled individuals drop things all the time, as all people do. But it's harder to pick things up when there is a walker, cane, or wheelchair to negotiate on the way down. Simple things, like retrieving something you dropped, are more difficult for those disabled by injury or disease. The floor can be so much farther away.

But not to a dog. Dogs can pick up credit cards. They must be taught to do that, of course, since very few dogs have bank accounts, but they can be taught to pick up credit cards, keys, wallets, purses, all manner of things dropped by a human. They can also open and close doors, push elevator buttons, empty the dryer, help remove clothing, pull and stop wheelchairs, and fetch an endless variety of objects. And, bless 'em, they love every tail-wagging minute of it.

God gave dogs two important characteristics: loyalty and work ethic. They love to knock themselves out in the service of their human masters and mistresses. That simple reality is what led to the concept of "service dogs" for disabled individuals. The sad reality is that legions of disabled persons who would benefit from the assistance of service dogs are not able to. There are few trainers, first of all, and the fees for providing and training service dogs and their masters are beyond the reach of most disabled persons. After food, lodging, and medical expenses, there is frequently little, if anything, left. Consequently, there is a substantial unmet need.

Charmaine Wahl (call her "Cheri") wants to help change that. Cheri, who trained service dogs for fifteen years for Tucson-based Handidogs, Inc., and occasionally on her own afterward, says that service dogs can be "the whole key" to disabled individuals leading "independent and productive lives."

"It builds self-esteem in the person," she says. "As they are training the dog they realize they are doing something themselves." The process, Cheri states, "Takes the focus off the handicap and puts it on the dog." As a result, she says, "People are less intimidated. They speak up."

Service dogs also can help other individuals within the social circle of the disabled person. “It takes a lot of pressure off the family members,” according to Cheri. “Dogs bring out a different attitude in the non-handicapped,” she adds, because the focus is on the dog, not the disability. Service dogs accomplish things that go beyond fetching and pulling.

Although Cheri has trained “more dogs than I can remember,” she loves to talk about “Wazzle,” a dog she trained for herself. Wazzle was six months old when Cheri got her and earned national recognition before she retired approximately fourteen years later. “She loved her work,” Cheri says of Wazzle. “Her tail was wagging constantly.”

In 1993 Wazzle received the “Certificate of Recognition” from The Delta Society, an annual award given to one dog in each of several categories. Wazzle and Cheri appeared on “The Today Show” in 1994 and chatted with Bryant Gumble and Katie Couric. Cheri has been awarded a Copper Letter from the City of Tucson and honored by KGUN-TV’s “People Who Care” feature. A substantial portion of one wall of her home is covered with honors and certificates. Wazzle’s “Certificate of Recognition” is in the center.

Cheri says that training service dogs is “the most productive thing of my life.” She adds, “I would give anything to get back into dog training.”

I interviewed Cheri Wahl in her home on the west side, where I also met her four dogs, including her personal service dogs, “Sierra” and “Mariah.” Cheri’s body has gradually given out on her and she has not walked since 2001. She is largely confined to her wheelchair and her home. Too confined. “I need to get my independence back,” Cheri says. “My self-esteem is down.” Cheri Wahl wants to regain her productivity and independence by helping other individuals regain theirs. She has lost walking and a loved one in the last three years and has no intention of feeling sorry for herself. She wants to stay busy, and her health now permits it. More importantly, Cheri realizes her health and well-being depend on her staying as busy as possible.

So, here is a thought. Cheri Wahl, an experienced and award-winning service dog trainer, is available. She knows that most disabled individuals and their families have difficulty affording the fees normally charged by professional dog trainers. Cheri sees an avenue that can help her to help others while helping herself. She will train service dogs for disabled individuals at reduced, accessible fees. That will reach a population that has been largely unserved. In return for helping other disabled individuals regain their independence, she will regain hers. A win-win situation.

Service dogs are “the arms and legs of their owners,” says Cheri. Imagine giving somebody arms and legs for Christmas.