

On the Positive Side

Decision to use service dog not to be taken lightly

By Kathryn Rosenthal / For the Sun-News

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I'm thinking about getting a service dog. What do I need to know? A service dog can make a disabled person's life easier and more enjoyable. But having a service dog is not all rainbows and butterflies. You need to stay in the real world when considering such an important step in your life. Having a service dog is a long-term commitment - at least 10 years.

Your dog will have needs of its own. The basics are food, water, exercise, regular vet care and grooming, as well as someone to clean up after it.

What dog breeds make good service dogs? Many trainers choose Golden and Labrador Retrievers. But if you are allergic to the dander or saliva of dogs, one of the many "hypo-allergenic" dogs (like poodles) may be a better choice.

What about size? It depends on the specific needs of the disabled person. A large dog will be able to pull a child's wheelchair or help a person who has vision problems walk. A small dog may be perfect to help someone with a hearing loss. Small dogs fit comfortably under restaurant tables and on buses and planes. They are much more (forgive me) "packable" than large dogs.

Does temperament count? Yes, it's one of the most important qualities in choosing a service dog. The dog needs to be people oriented and not too protective. It should be calm and not require too much exercise - or grooming.

Is it OK to take my service dog to the dog park? It depends. Is the park clean? Are the other dogs friendly? Letting your dog run and play off-lead can be a reward and a great source of exercise. However, your trained service dog may need some time to get comfortable being within sight of you, but not right next to you.

Can a shelter dog become a good service dog? Absolutely! A shelter dog, if carefully chosen, can be an excellent choice.

Whew, there's a lot to think about before deciding to get a service dog. And yet, a dog that is specifically trained to help you with daily tasks that are difficult for you to perform can be a true blessing in your life.

Angels come in all shapes and sizes; some even look like dogs!

Want to learn more? www.deltasociety.org

Kathryn Rosenthal is a former teacher, IBM retiree and proud "mom" to a service dog.