

## *Let me tell you a story...*

A story of life-long bonds and partnership, selfless love and service. A story I was fortunate enough to witness first-hand during my Internship at Saint Francis Service Dogs in Roanoke. And it all starts with a puppy.

This is not your average story which ends up within the pages of a Hollywood script, but the main character, a Saint Francis Service Dog, has an immeasurable degree of impact over the lives of partners and their families, as well as those blessed with the opportunity to work with them during the short time before they are matched. Our part of the story takes place over 2 years, but it would take a lifetime to tell the whole tale (at least, a dog's lifetime).

*On a "quiet" afternoon, a phone rings at Saint Francis Service Dogs. On the other end is a kind-hearted dog breeder with a litter of puppies on the way! She has heard about Saint Francis, and knows that they obtain, train, and place service dogs with deserving partners with developmental and physical disabilities. The caller is excited to be part of this mission, and wants to donate one of the puppies to become a service dog. After meeting the owners and parent dogs, Saint Francis would like to observe and test the puppies once they are born. A few weeks pass, and finally the world is blessed with another litter of adorable puppies. An observation and testing date is set, and soon arrives. Should they perform well during this test, they will be accepted into the program and eligible to be Saint Francis Service Dogs.*

A phone call just like this took place during my time at Saint Francis. Two calls, actually. Saint Francis received pictures, e-mails, and phone calls about these puppies, but the excitement peaks at the test date, where the first interaction with the puppies takes place. And I had the great pleasure of being part of the puppy testing during my very last day there. Though the breeder was sad to see the puppies go, she was beaming with pride. She knew how important her role is in this process. After returning to SFSD facility, each of the three new puppies was tested using a variety of environmental stimuli, including but not limited to different ground textures, sounds, and obstacles. They were evaluated based on their response to these stimuli, and to see how they react in new environments with new people. The puppies did great, and are now on their way to become service dogs!

*Luckily for the heroes of our story, they pass with flying colors and enter their first stage of training: **Puppy Raising**. Saint Francis has a loving and patient team of Puppy Raisers who invite these young pups into their home for the first year or so of life, teaching them the basics in socialization and being a service dog. Some days are harder than others, but these Puppy Raisers persevere, knowing what the end goal is: to enhance the life of a deserving partner. A partner who has undoubtedly faced rough times, isolation, sadness, and a life of having to overcome challenges. A partner with a loving spirit, pure heart, and spot in their life for a dog.*

These Saint Francis Puppy Raisers come in three forms. The **traditional puppy raisers** invite the young pups into their homes for several weeks at a time, where they teach basic commands and take pups on field trips for socialization. Puppies can also go to non-traditional puppy raisers, who, some may be surprised to learn, are a group of inmates at Bland Correctional Center. The inmates train the "**Prison Pups**" using the same training model as the traditional puppy raisers, including weekly training classes where a staff trainer meets with them to discuss how things have been progressing, and to offer tips on how to improve or work through difficult tasks. The newest puppy raiser program has been given the nickname "**Puppy University**", and incorporates the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine community. Students and faculty/staff members will work as teams to raise a puppy in the "traditional" sense. These teams will share the responsibilities of raising, training, and socializing the puppies, and in all seriousness, what vet student doesn't want to play with a puppy????

I would like focus for a second on the "Prison Pup" program. I had the unique privilege of visiting Bland Correctional Center for puppy class, and was given the opportunity to meet and interact with some of the inmates during class. These men are *so* proud of their job, and will gladly show whoever is visiting what they have taught and perfected with their puppy. They love the dogs, and know that they are part of a bigger plan to provide a service for partners. And even though the puppies are ultimately destined for their partnership, their time at Bland foreshadows the magnitude of their role not only with physical tasks, but as emotional support. Though they are not "therapy dogs", these service dogs provide joy and happiness to so many lives along the way, including the men at Bland.

**Now, back to the story...**

*After the puppies, now of age to be called "dogs", have passed their tests, they matriculate to **advanced training** with either a Staff Trainer or a Field Trainer.*

These trainers continue to work on socialization, while teaching them more advanced commands and combinations of commands to perform practical tasks for the future partners. The dogs continue to meet for training classes once a week, and continue to build their repertoire of tasks.

*As they improve their skill sets, the trainers and staff at Saint Francis begin to look through the candidate list to find a potential partner for the dogs.*

**Candidates** have been screened prior to this point, and once accepted into the program Saint Francis makes a promise to find them a dog. The matching process involves interviews, Candidate Class, and much discussion. Saint Francis works hard to assure that the partners and dogs are matched appropriately, and take many variables into consideration including temperament, skill sets/needs, energy level, and overall personality.

*And finally, the date is set. The interview which will allow the candidate to meet their potential new dog. Those who are in that room with the candidate, who sits anxiously while answering questions and listening to a description of the dog selected to participate in the interview, know what magic they could witness...*

Though many may say it won't be the typical "meet-cute" of Hollywood, others would disagree. That's not to say that every interview leads to a match; some interviews provide information about the dog and candidate, but may not result in a partnership. And not all matches will be blatantly obvious. But there are those meetings that lead to an instant connection. And when an interview can result in that connection, the bond of a lifetime begins. As in any friendship or partnership, this requires work. They will have training classes and re-certifications over the years. But is it worth it? Absolutely. That's why the waiting list is so long. Not only is Saint Francis a spectacular organization, raising, training, and caring for dogs at no cost to the partner, but service dogs provide physical support through task work, emotional support, and peace of mind.

But what about the dogs? Isn't it cruel to make them work all day, every day? Well, I guess you would have to define "work", because the dogs in the program don't work a day in their lives. The SFSD trainers are so gifted, and have developed their training model to make it all a game for the dogs. Trainers believe in positive reinforcement, and accomplish this through verbal cues ("yes!" and praise) as well as treats. The dogs incessantly smile and wag their tails, and if stress is ever detected, the trainers take a break, toss a ball for a few minutes, and allow the stress to melt away. The dogs are not kept in their kennel 24/7, either. They go on several walks throughout the day, and go to foster homes for several days at a time (a weekly mini-vacation from training).

**This is a true story.** The characters are real. The events are real. Though I did not have the opportunity to participate in a Candidate Class or the 10 day Team Training, I did get to see everything else from puppy testing to training classes, to vet visits, and finally to the interview and even re-certifications. Along the way I was constantly amazed by not only how intelligent and intuitive the dogs are, but also by how amazing the people who make this all possible truly are.

***\*Roll Credits\****

SFSD could not function without the Administrative and Development Assistant, or "Gatekeeper", at the front door, or the Volunteer Coordinator who first answered my e-mail regarding a 3 week internship/externship/preceptorship at SFSD. The Puppy Program Manager and Operations Coordinator (my supervisor the past 3 weeks) are as vital to the organization as the Executive Director and Development Director. The Book Keeper, Kennel Manager, Groundskeeper, and Volunteers also play vital roles in the organization. And let's not forget the Training Manager and trainers, including the Puppy Raisers, Bland inmates, Field Trainers, and Staff Trainers, who all play a part in developing a good service dog, and learning the dogs to help create the best match possible.

This experience opened my eyes to the service dog world. Along the way I made wonderful friendships, learned a lot about the fine people at SFSD, and of course gained exposure and experience with a different model of dog training. But most importantly, I got to witness one of the most beautiful stories along the way. One I can say without a doubt I will never forget.

*The End.*



**Dani and her dog, Aria**