



DOGS THAT HELP

Canine Companions for Independence

By Michelle Turner



Service dogs can have an amazing impact on people's lives, but for one Phoenix man, his service dog went above and beyond: His yellow Lab introduced him to his wife.

Dominic Bartola's life had been so transformed by his service dog Plato, that he created an Instagram account for the dog (hearing dog_Plato). The photogenic dog got a lot of followers, including Bartola's future wife, Melanie, who, after liking his dog, wanted to see if she would like Plato's human. She contacted Bartola via Facebook, and the rest is history.



Dominic, Melanie and Plato

14 to 16 months, dogs attend an intensive six-month training course at one of six regional CCI training centers.

A common concern for potential puppy raisers is the thought of giving up the pups they have raised. And, while not an easy thing, knowing your pup will have a lifetime of improving their human's life, does ease the separation. Puppy raisers also attend the team graduations and get to see their puppy paired with his or her new human partner. Puppy raisers, like fosters, are, themselves, a very special breed, prepared for shorter term relationships with these pups, they know that the very special lives these dogs are going on to share can only happen with their own unselfish help.

After training, the dogs are matched with applicants. Started in 1975, *Canine Companions* was the first service-dog organization to train dogs for people who had disabilities other than blindness. Dogs are trained for people who are deaf, have developmental disabilities, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injuries, arthritis, cerebral palsy and other conditions. Adults, children and veterans are matched up for assistance dogs.



**Candy and Bob Hundertmark
with Service Dog Piazi**

Not all dogs trained by *Canine Companions* play matchmaker, like Plato, but the national non-profit-trained dogs do some other amazing things. They turn on lights, pick up keys, open doors, indicate if a smoke alarm is going off, and always react calmly and lovingly in tense situations.

Canine Companions for Independence, the largest service-dog organization in the world, doesn't charge for its dogs, who have each received at least \$50,000 worth of training. The non-profit breeds and trains the dogs, who are usually Golden Retrievers, Labrador Retrievers, or crosses of the two breeds. Puppies destined to be service dogs are raised by volunteers who take them to puppy classes and teach them house manners and public etiquette. At about

CCI has trained more than 5,000 assistance dogs. The 5,000th dog went to a former California police officer who was paralyzed in the line of duty. Service dog Sandoval helps by picking up dropped items and delivering them to the officer, turning lights on and off, opening and closing doors, and pulling the wheelchair, as well as being a constant companion.

In Arizona, the Valley of the Sun *Canine Companions* Chapter provides training for volunteer puppy raisers, hosts graduate-team gatherings and raises money and awareness for the organization.

One of its largest local CCI events is DogFest Walk 'n'Roll, which will be held April 1, 2017, in Scottsdale. The large-scale walk is a chance to raise money and awareness of the 45 active service-dog graduates and 17 puppy raisers who live in Arizona. "It is an awesome group of people who support amazing dogs and people," said Bartola, who is now president of the Valley of the Sun chapter. This fall will be the 14th year the chapter has hosted the Dog Days of Summer Golf Tournament benefitting *Canine Companions*.



**Kelly Gordon Family and daughter Kylie
with Skilled Companion Dog Stasha, Dominic Bartola and Plato**

Bartola applied for his dog in 2011. Born almost completely deaf, he had resisted getting a service dog, even though he had grown up with dogs. Then, he saw a photo of a puppy a co-worker was raising to be a service dog. After some conversations, Bartola decided to apply for the *Canine Companions* program.

Following a thorough vetting process, Bartola went to California for team training with his new dog. He met Plato and the two bonded easily and permanently.

"He is very independent, very patient, selfless and food driven," Bartola says of his constant companion.

Plato can recognize up to 25 different sounds, from a phone ringing to a knock on the door. He will then alert Bartola to the sound by nudging him with his nose. Then Bartola asks Plato to take him to the sound. When the task is completed, Plato is rewarded with some kibble or other treat.

What if Plato had not been around? "I would have missed the call, the alarm, whatever," Bartola says with a shrug and rueful smile. "Plato has helped me in so many ways. I am so grateful for him. He has helped me find my passion in life, and now we want to help others."