

Service Dog is a Life-Changing Companion

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By Adam Williams



Amanda Villella is having a panic attack. It's not the first time; she's had them for years, though they've been less frequent of late. The attacks are easier to work through now too, thanks to her best friend, Cessco.

Cessco can tell when Amanda's getting anxious. Sometimes he'll come over and lie down with her, helping her to relax and regain control of her emotions, other times Amanda takes Cessco and finds a private place to spend some time with him. Before long she's feeling better and is ready to continue on with her day, free of the anxiety that was once so debilitating.

Cessco is a service dog. He's been trained to help Amanda control her anxiety disorder and to help her in her day-to-day interactions with society. When Amanda's anxious she pets Cessco and plays with his soft ears, which she says are her favourite thing about him.

"He makes me very happy," says Amanda, 22. "He helps me to do things like cross the street safely. I watch TV with him and hang out with him."

Service dogs are one of three types of assistance dogs as defined by Assistance Dogs International, the other two being hearing dogs and guide dogs. Service dogs can be trained to perform between 100 and 150 commands, like fetching a wallet or opening a door and have been used to assist clients with a spectrum of disabilities.

In addition to her anxiety disorder, Amanda has Prader-Willi Syndrome, a genetic disorder that generally results in developmental delays and trouble regulating bodily functions, most notably satisfying hunger. While the Villella family originally got Cessco to help Amanda with her anxiety, he also helps her to interact with people and navigate her environment safely, which can sometimes be difficult for people with Prader-Willi. What Cessco does may seem amazing – in fact it is – but it's also just an average day of work for a service dog.

Cessco is incredibly attentive and intuitive, with Amanda's safety always in mind, though from time to time that's been known to cause a few hiccups.

"We have a boat and she was tubing – it's a pontoon boat so he [Cessco] was on the boat – and he did not like us putting her in the water at all," said Amanda's mother, Kim Vallella. "He was quite anxious so I was holding on to him, but one time I wasn't holding on tight enough and didn't realize just how anxious he was. He jumped off [the boat] as she was tubing, took the tow-rope and pulled her in. Like put it in his mouth and pulled her in to the boat and kind of looked at us like, 'Are you kidding me? What are you doing?'"

Organizations have only just begun to scratch the surface of the many ways service dogs can help people; individuals with multiple sclerosis or cerebral palsy have been known to use service dogs to help with balance and bracing and it is becoming more and more common for individuals with autism to use service dogs to warn them of environmental dangers they're unable to detect independently. Service dogs are also finding work in the justice system – helping witnesses or victims to control their emotions in high-stress situations – and in the education system, where they're used in classrooms and after-school programs.

There are nine accredited assistance dog schools in Canada. Cessco is a graduate of Dogs with Wings, a non-profit based in Edmonton, Alta. While Dogs with Wings's service area is limited to Alberta, Pacific Assistance

Dogs Society provides many of the same services to British Columbians with disabilities. Dogs like Cessco are bred and raised within these organizations and evaluated for suitability as assistance dogs after about two years of training.

John Wheelwright, executive director of Dogs with Wings, estimates each dog his organization graduates is done so at a cost of about \$40,000. Clients receive their dogs at no personal cost and all subsequent dogs needed in the lifetime of the client are provided by Dogs with Wings as well; the average guide dog works for between eight and 10 years before retiring (dogs that retire are kept on by clients as family pets, or adopted out to other loving homes).

It's a costly endeavour for Dogs with Wings, but it's difficult to put a price on the impact dogs like Cessco have on the lives of people with disabilities.

"We thought that if she could bond to a dog, that dog would be with her all the time and would help her with transitions when we aren't there – and it has worked 100 per cent," Kim said. "We're still working on it, she won't spend time at just anybody's house but with key family members or service providers, she will go as long as she can take her dog. She'll have emotional issues while she's there but she uses Cessco as a comfort."

For years, Amanda had difficulty being separated from her parents, even if they were only headed to the grocery store or to put some gas in the vehicle. It presented a difficult situation for both Amanda and her parents, her anxiety so unbearable that she would become physically ill and have trouble sleeping. For a while she had to be on medication.

But with Cessco that's no longer necessary. Now, Amanda will spend entire nights with extended family, she has an easier time when her parents are at work, she even has her first job, doing pet therapy with Cessco at the Youville nursing home in St. Albert, Alta. He joins her as she participates in basketball, floor hockey, bowling and curling as a Special Olympics athlete and he's become a mascot of sorts, known by participants from around the province.

Amanda says Cessco helps her talk to people, which is perfect because Amanda loves to talk about Cessco. He makes it easier to do something like talking to a reporter, which she wouldn't be able to do without him.

For Amanda, who was quite lonely before getting Cessco, his companionship is irreplaceable. She now dog-sits once a week, looking after Cessco and the Villella's other dog, which allows her parents to get out of the house and go for dinner or see a movie. Amanda enjoys the responsibility of caring for the dogs on her own and will even remind her parents if they don't go out each week.

Cessco originally came into Amanda's life to help her with her anxiety and to allow her to function more independently, but he's done so much more than that. He's become her best friend, her protector, her cheering section at sporting events and her ever-faithful companion. He's given her the confidence to get a job, the courage to spend the night away from her parents and that little bit of extra help she needed to talk people and make friends.

In short, he's changed her life.

"Our family can't express in words what a difference Cessco has made in our daughter's life and how fortunate we are to have been placed with a dog like Cessco, who is really nothing short of perfect."