

# DOGS WITH A PURPOSE

## SAINT FRANCIS SERVICE DOGS: ASSISTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

### Psy mające cel. Psy Św. Franciszka: wspomagające osoby z niepełnosprawnością

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**A-** przygotowanie projektu badania (study design), **B-** zbieranie danych (data collection), **C-** analiza statystyczna (statistical analysis), **D-** interpretacja danych (data interpretation), **E-** przygotowanie maszynopisu (manuscript preparation), **F-** opracowanie piśmiennictwa (literature search), **G-** pozyskanie funduszy (funds collection)

#### Summary

Formed in 1996, Saint Francis Service Dogs is a non-profit organization working to improve the lives of children and adults with disabilities through partnership with a service dog. The organization is also committed to promoting the use and acceptance of service dogs through public and professional education, providing advocacy for service dog partners, and supporting the growth of the service dog industry on a national level. The organization's training center is located in Roanoke, Virginia USA, and is the largest service dog organization in the state. The Saint Francis Training Center includes a state-of-the-art kennel facility to house young dogs that are going through the training program. A recently-established program places service dogs with United States military veterans who have combat-related injuries. Co-founder Carol Willoughby credits her first service dog, Booker, with changing her life. He ultimately inspired her to form Saint Francis Service Dogs so that others in need could benefit from professionally trained service dogs. Today, Carol's life is brightened by her Saint Francis Service Dog, Midas. While providing valuable assistance, Midas also helps Carol promote awareness and appreciation for service dogs and the amazing difference they make in so many lives.

**Keywords:** Saint Francis Service Dogs, service dogs, assistance dogs, facility dogs, physical disabilities, emotional disabilities, Assistance Dogs International (ADI), Virginia Tech University

#### Streszczenie

„Psy Św. Franciszka” są organizacją charytatywną założoną w 1996 roku w celu poprawy życia niepełnosprawnych dzieci i dorosłych poprzez współpracę z psem przewodnikiem. Organizacja ta zajmuje się również promowaniem wykorzystania psów i akceptacji tego projektu poprzez edukowanie społeczeństwa i wspieranie popularności psów przewodników w całym kraju. Centrum szkoleniowe znajduje się w Roanoke w stanie Wirginia w Stanach Zjednoczonych i jest największym tego typu ośrodkiem w tym stanie. Ośrodek jest wyposażony w najnowocześniejsze udogodnienia i sprzęt, który umożliwia szkolenie młodych psów. Najnowszy program szkoleniowy zajmuje się szkoleniem psów dla weteranów wojennych po urazach odniesionych w czasie czynnej służby. Współzałożycielka Carol Willoughby jest wdzięczna swojemu pierwszemu psu o imieniu Booker, który całkowicie zmienił jej życie. To on zainspirował ją do założenia organizacji, tak aby inni ludzie również mogli korzystać z profesjonalnie wyszkolonych psów. Dzisiaj, życie Carol jest łatwiejsze dzięki następnemu psu o imieniu Midas, wyszkolonemu przez tę organizację. Oprócz zapewniania codziennej pomocy, Midas pomaga promować akceptację dla psów przewodników i ukazywać jak niesamowitą różnicę sprawia ich obecność w życiu tak wielu ludzi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Saint Francis Service Dogs, pies przewodnik, fizyczna niepełnosprawność, niepełnosprawność emocjonalna, Assistance Dogs International (ADI), Virginia Tech University.



Figure 1. Logo for Saint Francis Service Dogs

## Location

Surrounded by the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains in Roanoke, Virginia USA, sits one of the area's most extraordinary treasures: the beautiful 18-acre-campus and training center of Saint Francis Service Dogs.

## Mission

SAINT FRANCIS SERVICE DOGS is a non-profit organization whose purpose is to assist children and adults with disabilities to become more independent and self-sufficient through partnership with a professionally trained service dog.

The organization is also committed to promoting the use and acceptance of service dogs through public and professional education, providing advocacy for service dog partners, and supporting the growth of the service dog industry on a national level.

## Background

Established in 1996, Saint Francis Service Dogs started at the kitchen table of Co-founder Carol Willoughby. Meetings were initially held in her home. Experienced trainers were hired to train the organization's dogs in their own homes and in borrowed public spaces, such as churches and vacant retail stores.

Today the Saint Francis Training Center includes a state-of-the-art kennel facility to house young dogs that are going through the training program.

Saint Francis Service Dog puppies (mostly Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers) start their journey at only eight weeks old. All pups are tested and carefully selected for health, temperament and trainability. Then they are taken into the homes of volunteer puppy raisers. Over the next year the puppies are taught obedience and task work. They learn to be comfortable and confident in a variety of public settings. Many puppies also receive a substantial part of their training at Bland Correctional Facility, a prison where they are placed with carefully screened inmates. The pups raised in prison are regularly rotated into the homes of volunteers so that they can be exposed to the sights, sounds, smells and distractions typical in public environments. The pups spend their 2nd year with Saint Francis staff trainers. At the end of approximately two years of training and upon passing

four levels of testing, a graduation ceremony is held for the teams that have been matched. Each has a unique story to tell.

Since its inception, Saint Francis Service Dogs has raised and trained dogs to assist children and adults who have a variety of physical and mental disabilities.

A recently-established program places service dogs with United States military veterans who have combat-related injuries. In addition, Facility Dogs are trained to help in institutional settings including a school for children with autism and a hospital rehabilitation center. Like all Saint Francis Service Dogs, Facility Dogs go through two years of training before they graduate. They live with their handler/owners and accompany them to work at their facility. Facility Dogs are unique because, unlike Service Dogs who work for one partner, Facility Dogs work with many different people within their facility.

## Overview

Formed in 1996, Saint Francis Service Dogs is the largest service dog organization in the state of Virginia and is accredited by Assistance Dogs International (ADI).

ADI is a coalition of not-for-profit assistance dog organizations. The purpose of ADI is to improve the areas of training, placement, and utilization of assistance dogs, staff and volunteer education, as well as educating the public about assistance dogs, and advocating for the legal rights of people with disabilities partnered with assistance dogs.

*"Accreditation is the ultimate validation of the quality of work we do here in Roanoke," said Saint Francis Service Dogs Executive Director Cabell Youell. "We have an outstanding staff and an extremely dedicated group of volunteers. Every one of them believes in the value and importance of our mission," she said.*

*"Saint Francis is a shining example of how a service dog organization should operate," said the ADI Assessor. "Not only does the organization meet the criteria, but in many cases they set the gold standard."*

Over the years, Saint Francis has placed many professionally trained service dogs to assist people with a wide range of disabilities, including autism, cerebral palsy, joint and/or muscular diseases, multiple sclerosis, brain injury, paralysis, Parkinson's, rheumatoid arthritis, and many other disabling conditions.

It takes two years and costs up to \$25,000 to train one service dog. Saint Francis absorbs this cost and does not charge for service dogs.

Presently, Saint Francis places 10-15 service dogs per year in their service area, which includes the entire state of Virginia as well as the area within a three hour drive of Roanoke, Virginia.

The goal is to place up to 25 service dogs per year while maintaining their trademark personalized training and attention to each individual partnership.

Saint Francis is not state or federally funded and does not receive insurance reimbursements. The organization relies entirely on grants, fundraisers, and private donations from individuals and corporations to fulfill its goal of serving people with disabilities. A committee made up of professionals in health care, education and canine training carefully screens candidates. Once qualified, each candidate is then given a dog without charge.

## My Story: The World of Difference Service Dogs Can Make

### Carol Willoughby

It all began for me in 1986, when I got my first service dog, Booker. I've been disabled since my early 20's due to severe rheumatoid arthritis. When I got Booker, he changed my life.

It's frustrating to drop a crutch, a pen, a hairbrush, or a book and not be able to pick it up. It's frightening to imagine falling with no one around and no way to get the phone to call for help. Booker gave me the gift of independence. Having spent more than a decade battling severe rheumatoid arthritis and undergoing numerous joint replacements, I was elated to have a dog to help me with these physical tasks and to serve as my arms and legs. Yet, he did so much more. He restored my self-confidence, helped me raise two sons, motivated me to start a business and helped shape the attitudes of thousands of school children through Ability Awareness programs and service dog demonstrations.

In 1986, my magnificent golden retriever transformed my life and the lives of my family. Two years later, Booker became the first "privately trained" service dog to win the title National Service Dog of the Year. The media attention that followed changed my life even more. Along with publicity came requests to do speaking engagements, to talk about service dogs and the difference Booker had made in my life. Everywhere Booker and I traveled, we met adults and children who could benefit from a service dog. This was when I first began to see how many people needed service dogs. The number was enormous and the need was not being met. With Booker to motivate me every day, in 1996, I started Saint Francis Service Dogs to help meet that need.

I clearly recognized the value a top-quality service dog organization would bring to my own state; and in 1996, Saint Francis Service Dogs became a reality. Its purpose was to provide trained dogs for people who needed them free-of-charge. Saint Francis would raise and train the dogs to perform more than 100 different tasks helpful to daily living. These include opening and closing doors, retrieving the phone, fetching medicine, drinks or food from the refrigerator, turning lights on or off, picking up dropped or unreachable items and alerting another person to help in emergencies. In addition to providing physical help, the dogs offer emotional support as they assist and motivate their partners.

A study published in JAMA—The Journal of the American Medical Association—that same year offered scientific evidence of the benefits of service dogs in society [1]. It verified that service dogs decrease medical costs and increase well-being and productivity for individuals with disabilities. The study, entitled "The Value of Service Dogs for People with Severe Ambulatory Disabilities," showed that over the 8-10 year working life of a service dog, \$60,000 - \$80,000 per individual may be saved, with a 68% reduction in human-care hours.

Thus the National Service Dog Award I received in 1988 launched a far-reaching mission, one I would never have imagined at the time.

The need for service dogs is tremendous because there are an estimated 34.2 million people in the USA, or 17.5%, that have a functional limitation. Of that number, it is estimated that about 10% could benefit from service dogs.

Booker proved to me that life holds a unique purpose for each and every one of us. Working together restored my

confidence. He taught me that I could live beyond imposed limitations. Gradually, he led me to discover how others with disabilities could experience the same power of hope, dignity and independence that I experienced daily with a service dog by my side. I feel rewarded every day of my life by seeing the joy Saint Francis service dogs bring to their partners. Thanks to Booker, I never lost hope.

Today I am blessed to have another service dog to help me. Midas is a golden retriever trained by Saint Francis. With Midas beside me in the community, everyone I see takes a moment to smile and say hello. At home, I feel much more secure knowing Midas is there in an emergency or to help with anything I need. Midas makes life fun, safer and more interesting.

He also adds his own special personality to the happiness felt in our home. My family enjoys peace of mind knowing that I am never alone. I always have Midas to help with tasks, such as opening and closing doors, picking up anything I drop, or carrying items. Plus, the phone is never beyond reach because Midas quickly brings it to me.

Whether or not I give him a command, he tries to anticipate what I will need. Quietly, he watches. He listens. He waits. I awaken in the morning feeling his stare. Midas sits on his haunches, eyes glued to mine. He has already gently placed my telephone next to me. How long has he been waiting? I have no idea. He does not nudge me, bark, lick or whimper. He simply waits. Loyal and loving, he waits for a command. His very essence in my life boosts my spirit every moment of each day.

One of Midas' favorite jobs requires him to bump the automated-door button at the shopping mall. Standing upright on his back legs and placing his front paws gently on the wall, he gives the button a swift tap with his nose. Midas always seems especially pleased with his own nose-power as the wide mall doors open immediately for us. Then his bright eyes gleam with satisfaction. Midas tilts his head sideways and flashes me a totally amazed grin, looking to me for approval - and maybe a treat, too. Obeying my verbal cue of either Left or Right, Midas swings gracefully to the correct side of my wheelchair. As we enter the mall together, it's easy to see why he is the service dog of my dreams.



Figure 2. Carol Willoughby holding an 8-week-old golden retriever going to the prison for training, with Niki Voudren, Saint Francis Staff Member



Figure 3. Jake Jones and Saint Francis Service Dog Bodie, bumping automated door button on command



Figure 4. Carol Willoughby & Midas outside the Saint Francis Service Dogs Kennel

## References

1. Allen K, Blascovich J. The value of service dogs for people with severe ambulatory disabilities. *JAMA* 1996; 275: 1001-1006



Figure 5. Carol Willoughby and Midas

## BIO:

Carol Willoughby became an advocate for people with disabilities in the early 1970's after being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at age 22.

Her first service dog, a privately-trained golden retriever named Booker, came into her life in 1986. Booker restored her dwindling self-confidence, assisted with daily tasks, provided her husband with peace of mind, and helped raise two sons. The difference Booker made in Carol's life inspired her to establish the non-profit Saint Francis Service Dogs at her kitchen table in 1996. She served as executive director in a volunteer capacity for 5-years, until the organization could hire paid staff and raise enough money to buy land for a training facility.

She has received state and national awards from the Arthritis Foundation, a national award from the Delta Society, and the Woman of Achievement Award from the YWCA of the Roanoke Valley.

Although Booker died just 3-days prior to the grand opening celebration of Saint Francis Service Dogs, he received a posthumous award at Virginia Tech and became the namesake of the annual award honoring exceptional service dog teams. The Booker Willoughby Awards have been presented every spring since 1997 by Omega Tau Sigma Veterinary Fraternity and The Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine. Booker's portrait hangs in the lobby of the veterinary teaching hospital, where he continues to increase awareness of the Human-Animal Bond and the important work of service dogs.

Today, Carol enjoys writing short stories and articles and is writing her memoir. Her short story, "Amanda's Triumphant March," is featured in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs*. She lives in Roanoke, Virginia with her husband and best friend of forty-four years, Doug Willoughby, and her service dog Midas.

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