

Carolina Living

MONDAY, JULY 1, 2002

MORE THAN A PET, CANINE REPRESENTS HOPE



DAVID T. FOSTER III - STAFF PHOTO

Huntington's disease patient Tammy Gutzeit (right) hugs her Bernese mountain dog, Partner, as dog trainer Gretchen Hollifield looks on. Gutzeit came up with the idea to use a service dog to help her get around.

She found herself a Partner for life

Huntington's patient turns to service dog to help her get by

By MIKE STOBBE
Staff Writer

Tammy Gutzeit knelt on the back deck of her lakeside house and barked a command.

"Brace!"

Her dog - a soft-eyed behemoth named Partner - stood still beside her. She grabbed a handle harnessed to his back like a saddle, and pulled her 135-pound frame back to standing.

"Good brace! Good brace!" she said, and gave him a homemade peanut-butter treat.

It was much more than an unusual pet trick. Gutzeit, 49, has Huntington's disease, a rare condition that over the last four years has wobbled her balance, damaged her coordination and sapped her memory, speech and ability to read.

Many Huntington's patients withdraw into their homes. They are emotionally depressed by the

disease and embarrassed by how they jerk, stagger and fall. They need people to cling to, but hate to literally become a burden.

But Gutzeit came up with a novel solution: Train a canine to be her service dog, in a Huntington's variation of a guide dog for the blind.

When Partner is fully trained, Gutzeit said, she no longer will need some-one with her to walk to a nearby park, or go to a restaurant, or shop in a store. Partner will be the brace she needs.

"With Partner, I can go anywhere," she said.

Finding a Partner

Gutzeit has been going places her whole life.

The Boston native was accustomed to running five miles a day,

riding horses and sailing the south Atlantic. She ran her own graphics company. She married twice, including her current marriage of 20 years, and has two sons.

About 15 years ago, Gutzeit, her husband and youngest son settled into a pretty Cape Cod-style house on the south shore of Lake Norman that was conducive to both sailing and a scenic jog.

But she lived with a dark possibility: Her father had Huntington's disease, and each child of a Huntington's parent has a 50/50 chance of inheriting the disease. The symptoms usually surface in midlife.

At age 45, she began to fall during runs, something that had never happened before. She went for testing and was diagnosed with Huntington's.

"I wasn't that upset about it. I knew the chances were there. I had a nice life already," she said.

Still, as her symptoms progressed, Gutzeit found herself stuck at home all day, going through the same emotions other Huntington's sufferers do.

"I was too embarrassed to go in restaurants, because of my wiggles and speech and stuff," she said.

"(And) it's an awful burden of responsibility to my friends, to carry me and watch over me."

The idea of a service dog for Huntington's came to her about a year ago. Six months ago, she met Gretchen Hollifield, a dog trainer who was visiting the neighborhood to teach obedience to another family's canine.

"She just approached me and asked if I did handicapped assistance training (of dogs)," said Hollifield, 28.

The answer was no, but Hollifield said she'd be willing to start. Together, they started to look for a dog that was patient, intelligent, obedient and big enough for Gutzeit to use as a ladder.

After close to four months, Hollifield made contact with Susan Clawson, a Greensboro woman who bred Bernese mountain dogs. Reminiscent of St. Bernards, they are hardy and faithful working dogs

originally from Switzerland with long, silky black hair with rich brown markings and white chests and feet.

Clawson had nine of the dogs, including a young, neutered, unusually large male she had named Partner.

"I was not planning to get rid of him. He was to be my pet," Clawson said.

But after meeting Hollifield and watching her work with Partner, she agreed to take him to Charlotte and meet Gutzeit. She brought him to Gutzeit's home in early May, and ended up leaving him there, asking \$250 for a pure-bred that normally would cost \$1,000.

Clawson said Partner's personality seems well-suited to the unusual assignment. And his size - close to 30 inches from front paws to the top of his shoulders, and roughly 110 pounds - makes him big enough for the job.

Clawson had one concern: Bernese mountain dogs generally live only 10 to 12 years. She said she told Gutzeit that Partner, who already is 18 months old, might not live more than a decade. She said Gutzeit replied that was OK, because she might not either.

Not a barker

It's well-known that pets can be a comfort to sick people, said Pam Lowe, vice president of the head of the N.C. chapter of the Huntington's Disease Society of America.

For example, her husband David has been helped greatly by their 3-year-old golden retriever, Savannah.

"He's not able to work and is home alone. That little puppy forced him to pay attention (to her) and get him out of himself," she said.

But service dogs for Huntington's sufferers are very unusual.

Susan Duncan, a Bellevue, Wash.-based consultant who formerly directed the National Service Dog Center, said she does not know of a Huntington's patient using a service dog. She added, however, that she knows

