

Ron Meets His Pilot

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When Ron lost his good friend Timothy, the world became a duller place; colors lost vibrancy, motivation began to wane, and just leaving the house to run errands seemed more formidable and less interesting. There was something important missing from his life that Ron was not sure could be replaced. Timothy was Ron's service dog.

“I severely injured my back many years ago, and after four surgeries and time gone by, I've lost a great amount of physical stability when standing and walking. For me, the service dog takes the place of a walker or cane, and that's just for starters. One time I fell backwards into a rose bush and no one was there who was able to help me, so I called Timothy over and grabbed onto his collar and he was able to pull me back up to my feet.”

After Timothy died, Ron began a search for a new service dog but ran into many obstacles. The law of Supply-And-Demand is one of the major problems affecting all those searching for a service dog — simply, there are not enough trained dogs available for all of those in need. Discouraged, Ron and his wife Carole finally said, “If we're going to get another dog it's going to have to be a ‘God’ thing.” Then the mysterious ways began.

A friend of the couple suggested they visit Guide Dogs of the Desert in nearby Whitewater, California. The day they visited the campus, “we saw a man walking across the parking lot, and that was Bob Wendler [Director of Canine Operations]. We introduced ourselves, and he gave me his card. When I got home I emailed him a one-page profile, describing myself and what my needs were. Later I went on their web site and found out there was a graduation ceremony coming up. So I emailed Bob and told him we were coming and he replied, ‘I remember you and look forward to seeing you’.”

Unbeknownst to Ron and Carole, Bob Wendler had already forwarded the one-page profile to

Nicole Meadowcroft of Custom Canines, and Nicole had traveled from her home base in Wisconsin to attend the ceremony and to check out some of the organization's canine pupils [many of the dogs that don't quite make it as guide dogs are 'repurposed' as other types of service dogs]. Nicole was enthusiastic about meeting Ron and Carole and talking to them after the ceremony.

“After the ceremony the three of us sat down together, and I began to tell Nicole my story, and about five minutes into the conversation she said, ‘I think I can find you a dog’.”

Nicole recalls the meeting. “I was here [at Guide Dogs of the Desert] picking up two dogs to take back to Wisconsin and just happened to be here for that graduation. I had already seen Ron's profile, because Bob had sent it to me right away. Interestingly, when I came to pick up the two dogs, they showed me a young Black Lab named Pilot, and Emily, one of the trainers, said ‘What do you think of this dog?’ and I said ‘I want him,’ and she said, ‘Well, I haven't dropped him from the program yet and we're going to keep working on him, but I wanted to know what your thoughts were.’ So I had already seen Pilot, then I interviewed Ron, and I went back and told the staff here that I need a dog like Pilot for this gentleman.

“I always interview clients in their home before training a dog for them, so I came back out to California two months later to visit Ron and Carole. Before my interview with them I stopped off at Guide Dogs of the Desert to check out another dog I had in mind for Ron, and he was a good dog, but then Emily came out with Pilot and just said, ‘Here you go.’ I thought she was making a joke that I was not in the mood for, but she said, ‘Seriously. This just feels right — he's got a higher calling.’

“I *knew* Pilot was going to be *the one*. I knew it back in November.”

The major means by which Pilot assists Ron is as a stability device when walking, going up and down stairs, and standing. With the use of a custom-made dog harness that Nicole had designed around Ron's needs, Ron can lean on Pilot as he would a cane or walker, or if his balance requires it Ron can pull up on the harness as well and Pilot keeps him upright and steady on his feet. If Ron starts

stumbling, Pilot knows to stand “like a rock” until Ron gets stabilized.

Nicole continues, “From a training standpoint, we teach the dog to ‘brace.’ So, the dog is on all fours and if I say ‘brace,’ he needs to keep his feet planted and support the weight of the client. One of the reasons for the first home visit is to ascertain exactly what the needs of the client are, and then to go back and train the dog for every scenario in which it may need to assist that individual.” Hence the ‘Custom’ in the name Custom Canines.

“This happened last Monday,” Ron offers as an example, “I needed to fix something on the refrigerator, and I was on my knees on the floor, and when I was done there was nothing around to lean on and Carole couldn’t help me. So we called Pilot, and he came over and I told him to brace, and I put one hand on his shoulders and the other hand on his rump, and I can put all my weight on him and he just stands there like a rock and I can get up off the floor without any other assistance.” Pilot’s rock-steady assistance will also help Ron when getting off the couch or up from a chair.

Nicole installed a wireless doorbell that is attached to a cabinet door down low at canine level, and Pilot is trained to use this to ‘ring’ for help should Ron find himself in some difficulty that the dog’s other skills cannot solve. “I tell him to ‘get help,’ and he runs and pushes the bell and then comes back by my side. So if Carole is in another part of the house, she will hear the doorbell and come to see what needs to be done.” Pilot can also push the handicap buttons on automatic doors, and has even pushed elevator buttons for Ron.

Custom Canines also encourages their clients to keep teaching their dogs new skills after the placement. “Like I told Ron: Pilot has his Masters, now he needs to work on his *Paw*-hd,” joked Nicole. To that end, due to his back troubles preventing easy bending over, Ron is beginning to teach Pilot to *retrieve*, or pick things up off the ground.

Ron talked about the value of having a service dog companion in his life: “With a service dog, there’s a lightening of your spirit; you’re able to live more like other people live, and walk in and out of

stores and not be labeled with the walker or the wheelchair and so on. So it's an incredible physical support and an *enablement*, to be able to do things you couldn't do independently before. But on top of the physical support, there's also the emotional companionship part of it all. That compensates some for the things you'd still like to do but can't do, and now you're finding that fulfillment in a little different way with the support of a dog — all that he means to you, all that he does for you, how he encourages you.

“People are drawn *to you* with a service dog, not necessarily so when you are with a walker or a chair. It has opened up so many conversations; recently I was in a store with Pilot and a woman came up and asked me to tell her about my service dog. It turned out her husband has MS and they were trying to find him a service dog but had been turned down by many of the organizations they went to, for the simple reason that there just were no dogs available. Cut to the ending, she and her husband are coming out to the [Guide Dogs of the Desert] graduation tomorrow to meet Nicole and see what she can do for them.”

When Pilot entered Ron's life, the colors in his world regained their vibrancy, he again enjoyed independent mobility, and his self-confidence found a healthy level. The only slight qualm Ron had about his new companion was with his name. ‘Timothy’ — the name of his former service dog — was a name found in the Bible, and Ron was contemplating changing Pilot's name to another one from that book. Then Ron remembered the words to an old hymn written in 1871 by Edward Hopper: “*Jesus, Savior, pilot me/ Over life's tempestuous sea;/ Unknown waves before me roll,/ Hiding rock and treacherous shoal./ Chart and compass come from Thee;/ Jesus, Savior, pilot me.*” Ron decided that his dog's name was perfect after all.