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When going to the dogs means a better life



McGillians and their working dogs (from left to right): Andréanne Langevin with Félix; Anthony Tibbs with Rhodes; and Natalie Martiniello with Sherby. / Photo: Owen Egan

Working dogs help disabled students navigate everyday obstacles

By Cynthia Lee

Navigating the slippery streets of Montreal in the middle of a January deep freeze is hard enough; imagine trying to do so without the benefit of sight. And working your way through throngs of freshmen to find your class in August is one thing; doing it if you have limited mobility is another.

For two McGillians, these scenarios aren't hypothetical; they are part of their daily routine. Andrew Tibbs and Natalie Martiniello are students with disabilities who enjoy greater ease in their day-to-day life thanks to their respective worker dogs, Rhodes and Sherby. The two golden Labradors are regulars on campus, attending classes, snagging front-row seats at high-profile speaker engagements and hanging out on the lower campus just basking in the sun.

The helpful canines, from the Guide Dogs for the Blind, an association based near San Francisco, are trained to work with their handlers and provide the best dog/human team possible. "Sherby's primary job is to protect me from any oncoming obstacles and find landmarks such as elevators," said Martiniello, a second-year English and Education undergrad. "They have great memories, so once you go somewhere for the first time; they tend to remember the route."

Before Martiniello got Sherby six years ago, her vision was better and she was able to get around using a white cane. Over the years, her vision has deteriorated and today she has "no useable vision" only able to discern light, shadows and color out of one eye. "Having a Sherby is a big improvement," she said.

Tibbs, who just completed a Law degree, echoes Martiniello's sentiments. "I can't see in bright environments, but have better vision at night and indoors," he said. "Having Rhodes lets me get around faster and with more confidence."

Rhodes, like most working dogs, is on duty when his harness is on. "After working with him for nearly six years, there's a strong connection between us," said Tibbs. "I feel he can sense a lot through his harness."

More than most, Martiniello understands the powerful connection between dog and owner. In 2006, Martiniello was at Dawson College during the shooting that killed one person and left another 19 injured. "I was in the room next to the entrance where the killer entered. I heard all this commotion and people shouting and bullets firing," said Martiniello. "Sherby wouldn't leave my side – she was literally stuck to me and managed to get me outside the school safely."

Both Tibbs and Martiniello field a lot of questions during their travels with their canine companions – some of them pretty amusing. "Many people think guide dogs can read signs or know to which stop to disembark on the métro, but it's not the case," said Tibbs. "They have an idea, but the handler is the one whose commands govern the dog to go forward, left or right."

Adds Martiniello: "We need to have a mental map of where we're headed and then relay commands to the dog. The only time they don't listen is when they are using intelligent disobedience. For example if I think it's safe to cross the street but Sherby sees a car coming, she stays put."

Andréanne Langevin is a second year Education student who is raising a puppy for students like Martiniello and Tibbs through the MIRA Foundation. A lifelong volunteer, Langevin had wanted to be a guide dog "raiser" since a MIRA representative visited her elementary school. Langevin is currently integrating Félix, a Bernese Mountain Dog and Labrador mix, into every aspect of her daily life in order to socialize the puppy and to get him accustomed to as many different environments and situations as possible.

After a year and a half of fostering by Langevin, Félix will be sent back to MIRA and evaluated to see if he possesses the right temperament and learning ability to go on to be trained as a full-fledged working dog. "I'm starting to know him very well, and I know he'll be able to do it. He's smart, a quick learner and he comes from a long line of working dogs," Langevin said, with obvious pride.

As a foster mom, Langevin doesn't provide guide dog training or harness work. After Félix grows past adolescence, he will be trained for a year then matched with a disabled person.

When asked why she does this, Langevin shrugs. "If there isn't someone like me to take on the responsibility of raising a puppy, then how would a disabled person get a dog?" she asked.

Editor

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