

The life of a service animal and its owner

By J. Patrick Reilly

According to John Shea, his daughter's service animal is the ugliest dog in the world.

True, Soldier may not win any beauty contests but for Shannon Shea-Becker, he looks plenty good to her.

Soldier is an English Bulldog and he is Shannon's constant companion. In fact she just flew to Arizona and back with him by her side to attend her mother-in-law's funeral.

"He slept most of the way," she said. "The woman in the seat next to me was amazed at how relaxed and quiet he was."

Relaxed is good because when he is not relaxed it is when something is wrong. Shannon could have a spike in her blood pressure or may have forgotten to take her medication on time. That is when Soldier lets her know something is not right.

"If I forget to take my meds he will start nuzzling my pocket where I keep it," she said.

Soldier does that because he has been trained to do so. He gained his knowledge through training with the Custom Canines Service Dog Academy.

By day Shannon is an IT specialist who operates as a project manager out of Beloit. By night or other free time she is a volunteer with the Academy and helped train Soldier.

Shannon is a veteran of the US Navy and suffers from hearing loss and PTSD. The hearing loss came from being around loud noises during her years of active duty. Her PTSD comes from suffering an attack by a superior which started a long battle with trust issues. She still suffers from that today.

Having Soldier with her 24/7 has eased the suffering.

He is not the only service dog in the Becker household. Shannon's husband, Patrick Becker, has a daughter who suffers from Autism and has a golden retriever from Custom Canine as a home companion.

Shannon grew up on a farm near Barneveld with her parents, John and Diane Shea. She was active in tech ed projects in high school and studied under Duane

Elfering who she credits with helping her achieve.

"Because of him I became a state officer in VICA and I had planned to attend UW-Stout to become a tech ed teacher," she said.

But a mix up with available financial aid caused her to make another choice.

"I found out I wasn't getting the funding I thought I was getting and I would not allow my parents to mortgage the family farm so I could go to school so I went to Milwaukee to explore other options," Shannon said.

When she came back home she had the option covered. She announced she would be going on duty in the US Navy in July.

"I graduated May 27 and left for active duty July 11," she said.

While at BHS she also played volleyball and softball along with being heavily involved in public speaking.

Besides receiving a service dog Shannon is also very active with helping others who need a canine companion. She started volunteering with the non-profit (in fact everyone with the Academy is a volunteer) in 2011 with fundraising activities for the Autism program and when she found out how individuals, families and causes are helped she was hooked.

"I couldn't walk away," she said.

Soldier is 3 1/2 and Shannon has had him since he was eight weeks old through owner/trainer activities. He is also used as a breeder and has produced several litters.

Shannon has expanded her volunteer service with the Academy to coordinating efforts to raise funds and awareness for service dogs to be placed with military veterans. She provides community outreach, grant writing, gives funding presentations and facilitates demonstrations to community organizations to increase awareness and generate funding for program specific need.

As more and more cases surface of veterans with PTSD, mobility issues and hearing problems Shannon finds the Academy getting more involved. Dogs are

customized to meet the needs of the veteran receiving the service animal and it takes two years or more of training to have the dog ready.

A dog will serve six or seven years before signs of health problems may arise. To be a good service dog the animal must have good hips and elbows and have a good temperament. They have to be trained how to act around other animals, people and food.

Service dogs must have a good record that can be traced with they are donated to the Academy. Donated dogs are important because they relieve funding issues for the people receiving them.

"We want veterans and others to be able to afford the dog," Shannon says.

Right now there have been 120 dogs in service over the last 10 years and 25 to 30 currently in training.

Veterans outreach keeps Shannon busy and she figures she visits 50 to 60 veterans conferences annually. Recently she and Soldier were at Dodgeville High School, the host site of the American Legion Third District spring conference where she told the story about her experiences and what the Academy has to offer.

"My 'fun' time and personal side passion is to work with non-profits, veteran organizations, and small business to help with their social media planning and marketing," Shannon said. "It gives the balance of creativity and coordination in my life that my brain needs to be happy."

Her main volunteer activity is to assist in the operations of Custom Canines Service Dog Academy. She helps provide organizational support and assistance in addition to coordinating event volunteers and schedules, soliciting businesses for donations and/or sponsorships, and increasing awareness of the organizational goals and core values of Custom Canines Service Dog Academy. Custom Canine Service Dog Academy is filled with success stories.

"He's been my good set of eyeballs for a good seven and a half years," said Custom Canine Service Dog Academy President Nicole Meadowcroft who is vision impaired and depends on her dog.

She leads the non-profit as it raises, trains and places service dogs for people with disabilities.

Shannon agrees and is very glad to have Soldier as her constant companion.

"He alerts me if someone is approaching from behind or if someone is coming up from my non-dominant hearing side so that I have an opportunity to react before I am startled," said Shannon about Soldier.

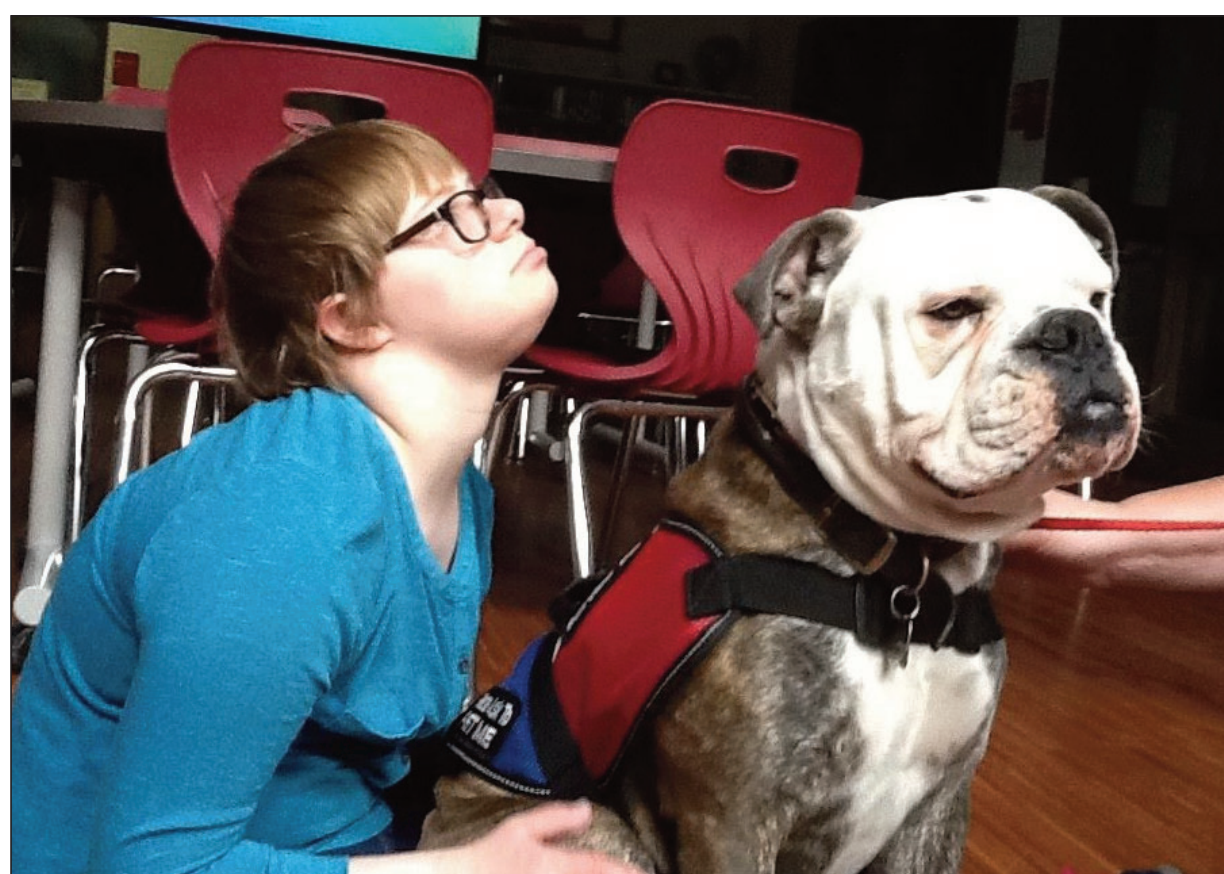
Shannon's bio on the Academy's website states:

Shannon Shea-Becker
Veteran Program Development
 Shannon Becker has worked with Custom Canines Service Dog Academy since early 2011. Over time, Shannon has transitioned from a puppy-raiser/volunteer for our Autism Service Dog Program, to our Director of Development, and has helped coordinate our volunteers for staffing events and fundraisers that keep our program(s) operational.

Summer of 2013, Shannon began networking with military resources and staff to begin the development of our formal Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Service Dog Program. Working with the military and veterans brings Shannon extreme satisfaction, and brings her back



According to John Shea, Shannon Shea-Becker's father, "Soldier is the ugliest dog in the world."



Soldier is introduced to this young person. He has been trained to be good around people.

to her own military roots.

Shannon served on active duty for the United States Navy from 1995 to 1999, and was honorably discharged.

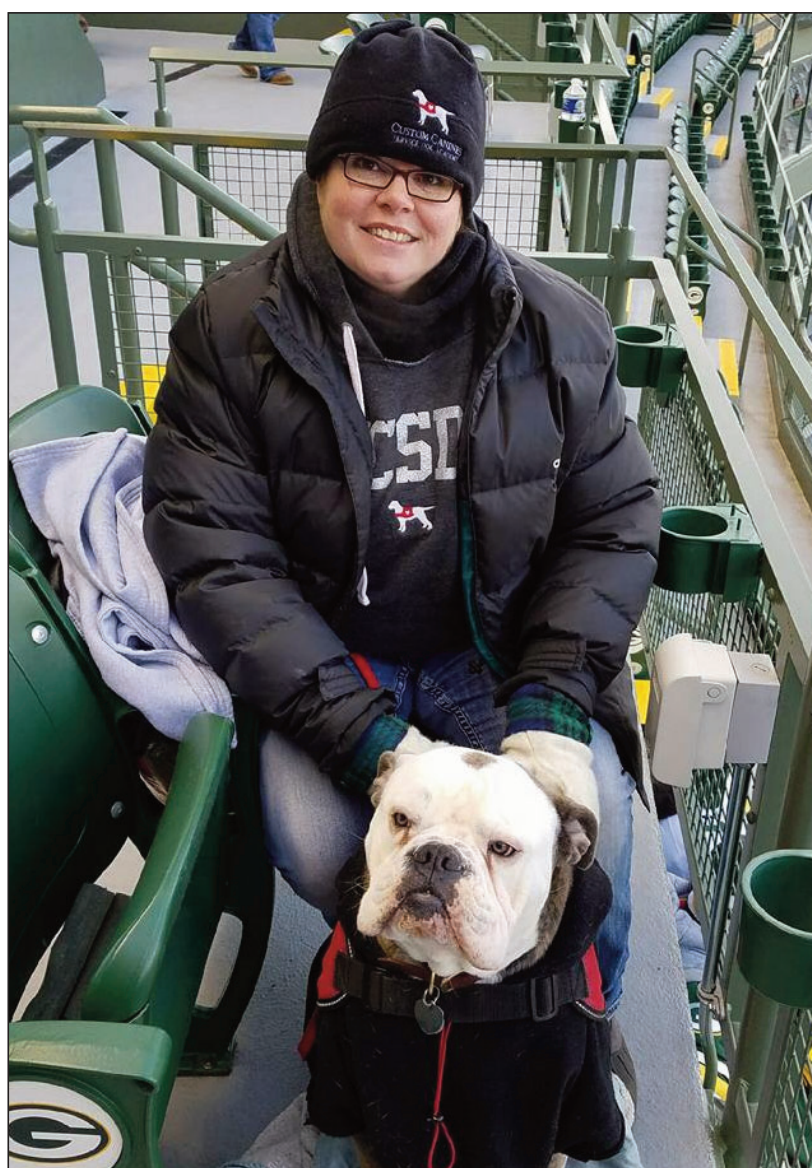
Shannon is a service-connected disabled veteran herself, and understands the importance of support and resources to aid our veterans in their service to our country, but also in their own per-

sonal lives. Shannon lives in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. She works for QBE North America as an IT Project Coordinator, and volunteers for CCSDA in her free time. Shannon is married to Patrick Becker and step-mom to Isabel Becker. Shannon has seen the impact of a service dog personally. Isabel is Autistic and has a golden retriever that was placed

as a home companion through Custom Canines.

Custom Canines Service Dog Academy is headquartered at 2310 Mustang Way, Madison. The phone number is 1-844-888-8850.

Information can be obtained by emailing info@customcanines.org.



Shannon Shea-Becker is happy to have Soldier with her 24/7. He helps her with her hearing loss, PTSD and with remembering to take her medications.



Shannon Shea-Becker and her service dog Soldier, is pictured with some happy people with their service animals.