

## Animal attraction



**Pets and service animals can make life with MS a bit easier—emotionally and physically.**

by Vicky Uhland



**Brenda and Chip Bolster with their late Shetland sheepdog, Sam, who provided much-needed love and support to Brenda, diagnosed with MS in 2000, and to the whole family.** Photo by

## Options Photography

Like many people, Brenda Bolster was scared and lonely in the early days after learning she had multiple sclerosis. As if the diagnosis in July 2000 weren't enough to handle, the family dog had recently died, too. Bolster thought a new puppy would provide companionship when she was alone in the family's Wakefield, Rhode Island, home. So she and her husband, Chip, adopted Sam, an 8-week-old Shetland sheepdog. Soon, Bolster discovered that not only was she feeling better emotionally, but also physically.

"Every day, Sam made me get up and focus on him and not my MS," she says. "Along with the joy and comfort he gave me, I found myself working harder to regain my strength in my arms and legs so I could walk him and carry him."

Bolster says Sam, who died in 2013, helped the rest of her family heal as well. "When Chip was feeling upset or worried about my disease, Sam would make Chip play and release his stress," she says. "Sam was like a guardian angel for all of us."

## Pets at our service

### **SERVICE DOGS**

[Assistance Dogs International](#) provides a directory of accredited service dog programs around the world.

[Assistance Dog United Campaign](#) offers financial assistance vouchers to individuals with disabilities who wish to obtain service dogs from 105 programs around the U.S.

[Pet Partners](#) has an extensive directory of service dog trainers, along with information and resources about service animals.

### **COMPANION ANIMALS**

[ASPCA](#) and [Petfinder](#) maintain up-to-date listings of pets available for adoption from local shelters and nonprofit organizations.

### **FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE**

[No Paws Left Behind](#) helps people facing foreclosure find temporary or permanent shelter for their pets. It also can help pay pet deposits for rental properties.

While there aren't published studies focusing specifically on how companion animals affect people with MS, a variety of research in the general population shows that simply petting a friendly animal for several minutes can lower blood pressure, reduce pain, alleviate anxiety, lessen depression and make people feel less isolated. For people with MS, trained service animals offer Even more: They can help improve balance, compensate for numb or spastic

hands, provide visual assistance and even pull wheelchairs.

## **21st-century Lassies**

Any type of companion animal like Sam can provide emotional and physical benefits—whether it be a dog, cat, horse, hamster, rabbit, reptile, bird or fish. Most animal experts say there’s no particular type of pet that’s better or worse for people with MS.

“Anything that gives you enjoyment can motivate you to be responsible for something other than yourself—and that can improve your life,” says Patty Bobryk, MHS, a physical therapist and MS-certified specialist at the MS Comprehensive Care Center of Central Florida.

But Bobryk says that because MS affects everyone differently, you should ask yourself some questions if you’re considering adding an animal to your life:

- **Can you physically care for a new pet?** This encompasses tasks such as walking a dog, taking a cat to the vet or cleaning out a birdcage. Mobility, balance, vision and fatigue symptoms can all affect your ability.
- **Will cognitive issues impede your ability to care for a pet?** For example, might you forget to feed the animal or be unable to keep it safe? If so, that doesn’t preclude you from having a companion animal; you just need to be sure that someone who lives with you can oversee its care.
- **Can you imagine having this animal in your life for the next 10 years or more?** And will the people who live with you be supportive of it? Given the unpredictability of MS, it’s a question you should ponder seriously. If the answer is no, a pet with a shorter life span, such as a rabbit, hamster or many species of fish, could be an option.

## **Trained to serve**

Service animals have all the advantages of companion animals, but with the added benefit of training specifically for their owner’s disability.



**Jeff and Colt ride together on Jeff’s favorite horse, Cottonwood.** Photo courtesy of Jeff Smith

Usually only dogs work as service animals. Most of them are trained to be comfortable around mobility devices, to be nonexcitable and nonaggressive, and to avoid food or pills that fall on the floor. In addition, to help someone with balance or vision issues, a service dog can wear a stiff harness with a handle that the person can grip and use as extra support and guidance when walking. The dog can also brace a person who is unsteady and help nudge him or her up if he or she falls. For someone with numbness or spasticity, a service dog can pick up things dropped on the floor, open and close doors, and even pull off socks and shoes.

Jeff Smith, a 34-year-old Tallahassee, Florida, resident who was diagnosed with MS in April 2011, relies on his black Labrador retriever, Colt, as a service dog. “Colt stays glued to my side when I’m walking and makes me feel more stable,” he says. Smith also grips Colt’s harness when going up and down stairs, using him as both a guide and an anchor.

When Smith’s hands go numb, Colt carries the house keys or other objects in his mouth. “He picks up on my MS symptoms even before I do,” Smith says. “He gets me up in the morning when the fatigue just completely racks me.”

### **More photos of Jeff Smith and his dog, Colt**

**Click on the thumbnails to view each photo.**

**Photos courtesy of Jeff Smith.**

### **ngg\_shortcode\_0\_placeholderDogged pursuit**

A variety of nonprofit organizations provide trained service dogs for free or at minimal cost to people with disabilities. But not many people with MS take advantage of this. “Folks with MS don’t necessarily see themselves as disabled enough to have a service dog,” says Mari Johnson, a trainer at Canine Companions for Independence in Florida.

A common misperception is that service dogs only work with people who are blind. But that’s not the case, Johnson says. Many people with MS-related mobility or vision challenges do qualify for a service dog; service animal organizations evaluate applicants and decide on a case-by-case basis. At Canine Companions, for example, an applicant has a phone interview and an in-person interview with staff. The staff also discusses the person’s abilities and challenges with the applicant’s healthcare team. People who don’t qualify tend to lack the necessary cognitive awareness to keep the dog safe, Johnson says—in which case they would need to have someone living with them full-time to oversee care of the dog, just as they would with a companion animal.

Because there is high demand for certified service dogs, it may take two years after an application is approved before a dog is available. But for many people, the wait is worth it. Whether your furry companion is a service dog or simply a pet, “nothing can compare to the unconditional love and emotional support they give you,” Bolster says. “They are such a healing thing for the whole family.”

**Vicky Uhland is a freelance writer and editor in Lafayette, Colorado.**