

## Samantha's Story

Samantha is the newest Private Placement Candidate for a Service Dog being trained at USP Hazelton, Bruceton Mills, WV. Samantha will "meet" the dogs at USP Hazelton in August 2009.



**paws4people™**

**paws4prisons™ SLAMMERDOGZ™**

**Private Placement  
Announcement**

The volunteers of **paws4people™**, **paws4prisons™** and the **SlammerDogZ™** Programs are proud to announce the selection of Samantha, a five-year old, who suffers from Infantile Spasms, a form of catastrophic epilepsy presented in infancy, as a Private Placement Candidate for a Service / Educational / Rehabilitative Assistance Dog.

Samantha was selected as a Private Placement Candidate [PPC] on June 2, 2009.

### Samantha Leiter Says:



#### 'With Four Paws I Can.....

- Balance better when I walk or run
- Have more independence appropriate for my age
- Have a furry friend who will pick me up when I fall down
- Have a little help getting in and out of chairs
- Hope that a furry friend can help when I have a seizure, get my people and my meds, then stay with me until I feel better or help comes
- Be calm when I am around others
- Stay focused when I am outside playing or inside my home
- Maybe even a little help in getting dressed and undressed
- Have a furry friend to break down barriers with people I meet
- Carry books or backpacks
- Have help when I drop something to pick it up
- Open and close doors
- Help me with stairs, going up and down
- Motivate me to keep trying harder in therapy
- Play with me at home and on a playground
- Learn to talk (I have a lot of commands I need to know!)
- **AND have a best furry friend.**



## A Perfect Life – A Story about Samantha Leiter by her Mother; Amy

I was 36 years old when we married, my husband and I decided to start a family quickly. Within two months, I was pregnant and expecting the first girl in a family with all boys! My pregnancy was not so easy. I was finishing up my MBA at night by doubling my course load. I felt sick all the time - not morning sickness sick, just run down. I told the nurse at my OB/GYN's office, "If this is the way women feel when they are pregnant, someone is keeping a big secret because this just doesn't seem right!"

One morning, on a whim, I took my blood pressure while at the grocery store. I couldn't believe the number it registered: 140/90. Something was wrong. I called my OB/GYN immediately and checked into the hospital by noon. I was 26 weeks pregnant with high blood pressure and having contractions. I was discharged on bed rest and spent the next four weeks at home.



At 30 weeks, my blood pressure was still a little high, but my platelets began to drop rapidly. I was diagnosed with preeclampsia along with HELLP syndrome (red blood cell breakdown and elevated liver enzymes). I went back to the hospital for the remainder of my pregnancy. The first week in the hospital, I was visited by two memorable people; at the time, I didn't think I needed either one of them. The neonatologist told me about the risks of having a premature baby and, more specifically, about intraventricular hemorrhages (IVH), otherwise known as strokes. I listened patiently to his speech and willed him to leave my room. I knew that he had cautioned many others who escaped the issues, and I thought to myself as he left, "I am going to carry this baby to term. This will not happen to me." Shortly afterwards, the chaplain came by. She offered me hope and encouragement and, though I have a lot of faith, I am not a terribly religious person. So like the doctor, I wished her to leave, too. I did not understand why all these people were trying

to take away the dreams of my pregnancy and, according to the ultra-sound, my beautiful little girl.

The next day at 31 weeks, our baby was delivered by emergency C-section. Samantha weighed 3 pounds, 11 ounces. We experienced the normal 'honeymoon' period in the NICU. She just needed a little help breathing and suffered a Grade 1 IVH, which after a week, was healing normally. She was moved into the intermediate nursery. The nurses were her cheerleaders, encouraging her to take the next steps...breathing and eating on her own.

When Samantha was 2 ½ weeks old, I experienced my first case of 'Mother's Intuition.' It was the night before Mother's Day, and I had a terrible urge to visit Samantha. When I did, I noticed Samantha looked 'spooked' and was very agitated. My blue-eyed little girl now had dark, distant eyes and was in distress. I questioned the nurse, who told me it was just growing pains. I left her a few hours later when she appeared to be more comfortable. But, on Mother's Day, it must have continued because the nurses would not let me see her until late at night. Once again, they explained to me that she was just getting older and a personality. In my opinion, something was wrong. I thought back to a nurse who stayed with me after delivering Samantha; she was watching me for seizures and wanted to see if I looked 'spooked.' At 5am the next morning, the same neonatologist who visited before delivery called to explain that our daughter was back in the NICU and having seizures. The CT scan showed that she had a Grade 3 IVH, which, by the end of the day, had escalated to a Grade 4 bilateral bleed.

We were transferred to the NICU at CHOA Scottish Rite. It was the worst day of our lives. Our not quite 4-pound baby girl was transferred in an ambulance to have the brain surgery to reduce the pressure caused by the hemorrhage. We stayed at Scottish Rite for 8 ½ weeks and received outstanding care. Samantha did not need a shunt, but she still had significant seizures and issues with breathing. The brain damage caused by the bleed brought one doctor to tears. Other doctors told us to have no hope for her future. We should anticipate that she will be in a bed receiving assistance for breathing, eating and general function. But three significant things did happen while we were at Scottish Rite:

(1) The first day we arrived, I pulled my husband aside for a heart to heart. Our daughter was not perfect and, in reading the issues resulting from a Grade 4 IVH, would most likely never be 'perfect.' We would likely face many issues which would affect her, our marriage and our family. If he was not willing to accept her for who she is or who we are now, then I wanted him to leave. We did not have the perfect life any longer, and I knew that would be hard for Matt to handle, or any family for that matter. Matt said his love for his daughter was unconditional. It was not an issue and we needed to focus 110% on her until she got well. With that conversation behind us, we were ready to work together for our daughter and to unravel this new world we were in. When you have a baby, you don't expect to have a lesson in neurology, ophthalmology, and pulmonology, just to name a few. We had a great primary nurse who led the way, attending every care conference, calling with positive news, and constantly reading Guess How Much I Love You to Samantha. After 5 years, Sammie and her nurse still have a very special bond, one I cannot compete with and would not change.

(2) The second significant event was when two doctors gave us hope, even with all of the worst case scenarios, by telling us that, as her parents, we can make a difference in Samantha's life. We are empowered to advocate for her and even when we walk through the doors of the hospital, doctor's office or therapist center, we do not lose the ability to advocate for her. We make a difference in her life - to push the limits, be vocal and demand the best (now we say 'most appropriate') for our daughter's quality of life. These two doctors gave us the hope and the power for a good future, regardless of our prognosis.

(3) The last and probably the most significant thing was actually a person: the cleaning lady at Scottish Rite who came each night; I felt this very kind woman looked over Samantha when I was not there. Every night, she came to Samantha's bedside and prayed for her



Samantha and her 4-year-old brother; Grayson

and called her 'my angel.' She brought me peace and comfort; one day she told me that 'God watches over all of our children.' This brought me a great amount of faith in the fact that I could only do so much, along with the doctors and nurses, but it was God who looked after all of our children, that He had a special place for them and will care for our babies. But, it also gave me the power to 'let go' and start letting other people take care of Samantha. All people can bring something valuable to her life.

Samantha was discharged after 11 weeks in two NICUs on our first wedding anniversary. We adjusted our lives to the monitors, the pulse ox machines and the oxygen deliveries. We hired and fired therapists and established the best team of individuals to help us through this unknown journey we had begun. We left the hospital with a long list of issues and acronyms and, as parents, we did not believe them.

We returned to Scottish Rite for a brain surgery and a vpn shunt at 6 months old, and a few months after that, Sammie was diagnosed with a relatively unusual seizure disorder called Infantile Spasms, which have a particular EEG pattern called Hypsarrhythmia. Each time we are told that Samantha needs brain surgery or that she has a seizure disorder, the statistics point to more possibilities of mental retardation (though I prefer cognitively delayed) and/or cerebral palsy, and we see this huge mountain ahead of us. It is almost unbearable, but we have learned to develop a plan, discover the options, put together a new and improved team, and find the support to start the climb.

At five years old, Sammie will be entering Pre-K at a fantastic school called Coralwood, where inclusion is their primary goal for the special kids. She receives 4 therapies a week at school, she has OT, PT, Aqua PT and Speech in the afternoon. She gives 110% at everything she does always with a smile on her face. She is everybody's best friend. I threaten my family, friends, doctors, nurses and therapists, that someday, I will write a book called 'Everybody's Baby'. Samantha's success comes from the team of people who 'live in her village'. It is the success of everyone working together to accomplish an unimaginable goal. For every thing a doctor told us Sammie wouldn't do, my husband and I put our minds together and figure out how we can do it. It is a challenge and Sammie benefits from that determination.

I look back, and the mountains we've climbed now seem like hills. More mountains are ahead, and we will face them together. But for now, I have to say that our life is perfect, and it is Samantha who makes it that way. A service dog would only complement and benefit Sammie and her future. It would help her climb those mountains.....faster.