

DAPHNE DELIVERS

Thirteen-year-old Ava Smith of Cornelius with her certified service dog, DAPHNE.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANT WALDECK

Ava Smith's certified service dog fetches happiness and so much more

by Lori K. Tate
photography by Brant Waldeck

Dr. Todd Smith has a tape measure in his hand. The veterinarian is measuring the girth of a golden retriever named DAPHNE for a harness. The 2-year-old dog stands patiently as Todd gets the information he needs. While it's obvious that he has a way with animals, it's even more obvious that DAPHNE is not a typical golden retriever.

Her calm demeanor coupled with her patience hints that there is much more to this animal than a game of fetch and a wagging tail. As a certified service dog, DAPHNE is a bundle of hope covered in fur for the Smith family.

A maddening ordeal

The Smiths met DAPHNE through the Paws4People Foundation, a nonprofit based in Wilmington, North Carolina whose mission is to educate and empower people to utilize assistance dogs to transform their lives. That's exactly what DAPHNE is doing for Ava Smith, Todd and Jenifer Smith's 13-year-old daughter.

The Smith family met DAPHNE in September of last year, and in December, DAPHNE moved into their Cornelius home. However, the story goes back much farther than that. It

goes back to a day in February 2016 when Ava woke up with a tremor in her left hand.

"The tremor moved from my hand to my forearm to my upper arm to my shoulder, and then down to both of my legs," remembers Ava, a rising eighth grader at Davidson Day School. The tremors continued, and eventually Ava's legs and left arm were paralyzed.

That began months of hospitalizations at Hemby Children's Hospital in Charlotte, Levine Children's



Brooke VanderSpuy of Lenux Stables & Riding Academy in Huntersville helps Ava ride her horse, Tiffany.

Hospital, Duke Medical Center and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Ava says she's had 12 to 15 MRIs since this all began in addition to numerous doctor appointments, CT scans and cerebral spinal fluid taps. With all of these specialists using the latest diagnostic tools available, you would think she would have a concrete diagnosis. However, that's not the case for Ava.

"It all depends on which neurologist you talk to," says Todd. "Some of them think its Lyme Disease. Some of them think that its immune-mediated neuropathy myopathy. I would say out of 30 to 40 doctors, you can't get more than three or four to agree on something."

Needless to say, the past year and half has been maddening for the Smith family. "The

fear you experience with the unknown is bigger than life itself," explains Jenifer. "Our family is living in a grey area with no black and white diagnosis, and there is no book that provides you with a step-by-step guide as to how to navigate these types of situations."

That said, the Smith family takes Ava's condition day by day. The good news is that she is getting better, and DAPHNE is a big reason why.

Riding to recovery

Before all of this happened Ava was a healthy and happy tween, riding horses and performing in the school play. In fact, the November before the tremors began, Ava was the 2015 Pleasure Champion for the Walk, Trot, Cantor class for Ages 10 and Under at The National Academy Championship Horse Show in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

Her love of horses, especially her horse, Tiffany, has been integral in her recovery, as horseback riding is part of her physical therapy, along with traditional physical therapy. Ava began riding again about a year ago, and she rides four times a week at Lenux Stables & Riding Academy in Huntersville. She goes to physical therapy twice a week at Novant Huntersville.

The one thing all of the physicians involved in her case agree on is that physical therapy is imperative for her recovery, and it's working, as she recently started walking again with the assistance of canes and braces. There is hope that Ava will eventually regain all of her mobility.

The idea of a service dog came into the picture during one of Ava's many hospitalizations. When she was a patient at Hemby

Children's Hospital, she met a therapy dog named Gator. Todd is quick to point out that Gator, an Anatolian Shepherd, is not a certified service dog like DAPHNE.

"The dogs that you see that go into nursing homes and go into schools to read to children, those are therapy dogs. There are different levels of therapy dogs," explains Todd, adding that the dogs go through some basic testing and are not covered by the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). "There is almost nothing you have to do to become a therapy dog."

Later on when Ava was at Duke Medical Center, she and Jenifer began looking for rehab programs. One program they discovered had a therapy dog, and that's when they began thinking of bringing a certified service dog into the rehabilitation process.

Todd began researching the idea. "When we started looking at all of these organizations, you find out that there's a lot of them out there that are just in it for the money," he explains, adding that DAPHNE is ADA certified. "Paws4People has this extremely rigid training program that is usually a minimum of six months long. ...Paws4People only places dogs with children and veterans."

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Ava trained DAPHNE to high five her when she makes a good pup.

More than a service dog

When DAPHNE's new harness arrives, it will allow her to serve as one of Ava's canes. While that's extremely helpful, DAPHNE offers Ava so much more, as she knows at least 100 commands and a number of signs. She also serves as a psychiatric alert for her.

"She is able to detect anxiety before I've even got it. She'll alert me, and she'll take me away from something that I don't want to be in. If she sees that I don't want to talk to someone or I don't like being touched, she'll step in between me and that person. She wakes me up if I have a bad dream," explains Ava. "She's sassy like me. I trained her to high five me whenever I make a good pun or win an argument."

"The anxiety thing is really amazing. If Ava and I are both upset at the same time, she goes to both of us," adds Jenifer. "Even though she's not my dog, she knows I'm upset, too. She tries to comfort everybody, which I think is incredibly sweet."

The Smiths, including their 15-year-old son, Ian, agree that DAPHNE has a goofy side, and with all this family has been through, goofy is appreciated. Jenifer says that DAPHNE is one of the only good things to come out of this horrific ordeal.

"Just knowing that Ava is happy, and that DAPHNE is the thing that makes her happy," says Jenifer, "she definitely adds a different dynamic to our family." □

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