

Nikki is a wonderful service dog

BY BONNIE MITCHELL, DVM
YourNews contributor

Dear Dr. Bonnie,

I am a service dog for a really wonderful girl named Macey who has Type 1 juvenile diabetes. She is 11 years old. I help alert her when her blood sugars get too low. I was trained by a wonderful local dog trainer who specializes in service dogs. There aren't many dogs out there like me and I wanted people to know how special I am. Can you explain the difference between a service dog and a therapy dog?

Thanks
Nikki

Dear Nikki,

You ARE a fabulous dog and what a wonderful gift you have given to Macey and her family. I am constantly amazed at how intelligent dogs are and how you can be trained to do just about anything!

Service dogs have been trained to help the blind, the deaf, people with epilepsy, diabetes and probably many more disabilities.

As a service dog, you are allowed to travel with Macey when she leaves the house. You have been trained to be out in public while still doing your job. This includes retail stores, the mall, the movie theater and restaurants. The reason you are allowed to do this is because you are protecting Macey from a health condition that could be life threatening. You let her know when her blood sugar is low, whether she is awake or asleep. Service dogs save lives every day. Some of your stories are just fascinating.

Service dogs are very highly trained. I know that you were in training for several months with a professional service dog trainer.



BONNIE MITCHELL, DVM
PAW PRINTS

And the reality is that your training never stops. You are always working with Macey, her family and your trainer to keep you in top condition. There are only a handful of dog trainers that are certified to teach you what you have learned. Aren't you lucky?

There is a big difference between a service dog and a therapy dog. Therapy dogs are wonderful dogs too. However, they serve very different purposes and recently there has been some controversy because some owners of therapy have abused the system set in place for service dogs.

Public places generally do not allow pets. This is for several reasons including hygiene and safety. But the law allows service dogs in these places with their handlers.

Therapy dogs, however, are not service dogs. Therapy dogs provide more emotional support and are greatly used in places like children's hospitals, nursing homes, hospice centers and schools.

Therapy dogs are also a great asset to people who suffer from emotional trauma, but this is not by law considered a disability.

Therapy dogs can be trained and certified by owners, not professional trainers. They do not go through months or years of training before going to their handlers.

Imagine if everyone with a therapy dog was allowed to bring their dog to these public places. There are

many places where they are having a terrible time with this issue.

The therapy dogs are distracting the service dogs like you from doing their job. They are causing problems for people who have allergies to dogs who are shopping or eating lunch at a restaurant.

I have read stories of therapy dogs that have instigated fights with service dogs to the point where the service dog is forced to respond. The sad outcome is that once a service dog has been in a fight, he or she is no longer fit to-work for their handler because they may develop a fear of other dogs, or people, or both.

This can be crippling to the handler who has spent so much time and in many cases lots of money to get a service dog.

I am by no means trying to spark a debate with people who own therapy dogs. Therapy dogs are wonderful and have provided support to many people all over the world. But the laws set in place for service dogs should not apply to therapy dogs. We certainly do not want service dogs to lose any of their privileges.

You and Macey are truly an inspiration. I am so happy to be sharing your story with everyone. This month is even more special because it is Diabetes Awareness month! You and the other diabetic alert dogs along with your trainers should get an extra hug and kiss for all of the hard work that you do!

Dr. Bonnie

Dr. Bonnie Mitchell is the veterinarian and owner of Coastal Animal Hospital in Jensen Beach. Please email questions and comments to bonniemitchell@dvm@gmail.com.

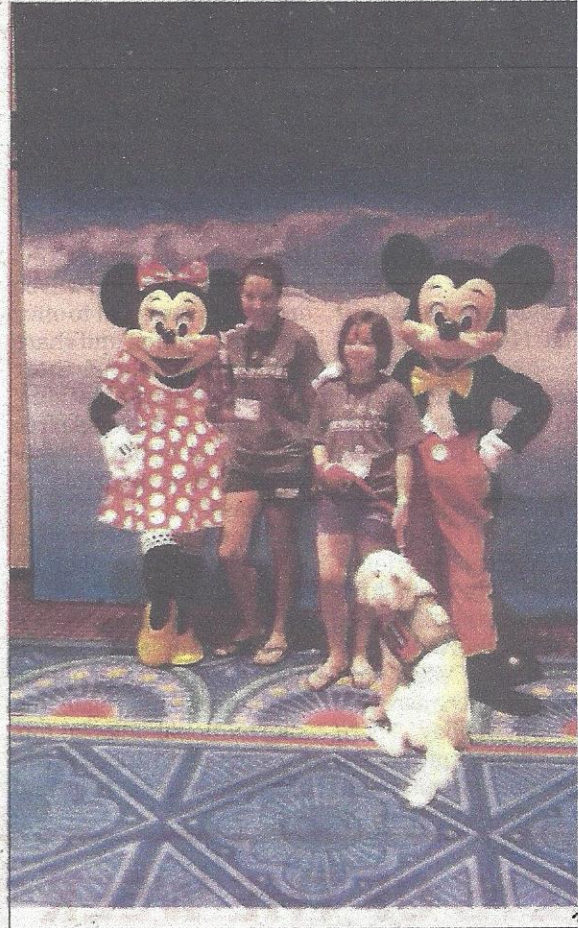


Photo provided by Macey's family
As her service dog, Nikki accompanied 11-year-old Macey to Disney World. Macey has Type 1 juvenile diabetes, and Nikki helps to alert her when her blood sugars get too low.

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