

Service dogs give love & hope to kids with special needs

Laura has trained and placed 75 pups, changing the lives of kids with special needs and their families



After a service dog changed the life of her son, who has autism, Laura Sylvester and her husband founded a nonprofit that partners other kids with disabilities with a ‘Good Dog’ of their own!

Laura Sylvester was walking through Disneyland with her husband, Rick, and their then-10-year-old son, Elliot, who has autism, one afternoon in 2011. Suddenly Elliot started screeching and flapping his hands, impulses he couldn't control.

As a couple ahead of them whipped around, Laura braced for the usual disapproving stares. Some people would loudly complain about his “inappropriate behavior” and “bad parents.” The negative energy would only fuel Elliot's discomfort.

But Elliot had just partnered with his first autism service dog, a yellow Labrador retriever named Orbit. When the couple noticed the affable dog wearing a vest marked *Service Dog*, they smiled.

All day long, Laura was shocked by the difference having a service dog made. For the first time, she and her family felt accepted rather than scorned, and that helped Elliot enjoy the day.

That night, Laura and Rick made a decision. *Other families need this*, they agreed.

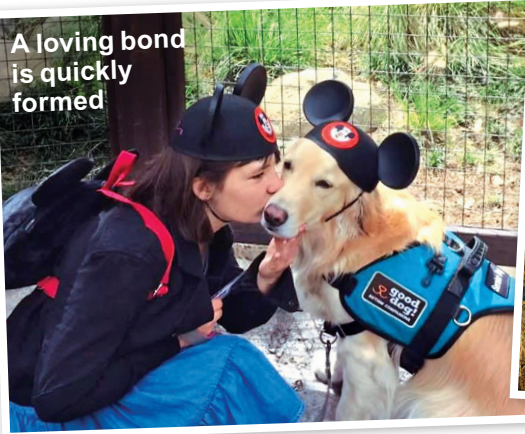
Heartfelt mission

Laura had been writing a blog about the experience of getting a service dog for Elliot. She shared her desire to help other families get a service dog too and announced the formation of Good Dog! Autism Companions.

It takes about two years for a pup to be completely trained to be a ‘Good Dog,’ and most are Labrador retrievers



A loving bond is quickly formed



Laura with her son, Elliot, and his dog, Orbit



The pups make good snuggle buddies

It didn't take long for families to start reaching out, wanting to get a dog.

Meanwhile, a friend introduced Laura to Dr. Bonita "Bonnie" Bergin, founder and president of the Bergin College of Canine Studies, which trains service dogs, and founder of the service dog nonprofits Canine Companions for Independence and Paws for Purple Hearts.

Bonnie mentored Laura and connected her with dog trainers. She taught Laura how to match dogs to their people, and how to train handlers. It felt like such a gift that Laura looked up to the sky and said, "Okay, we are meant to do this!"

The first year, they placed two dogs. The next year, five. Demand grew, including from families of children with other special needs. So in 2020, the nonprofit expanded to serve children with Down syndrome, Apraxia and ADHD, doing business as Good Dog! Service Canines (GoodDogServiceCanines.org).

Changing lives

The California-based nonprofit achieved accreditation with Assistance Dogs International, and by the end of 2023, celebrated placing their 75th service dog. Those Good Dogs—mostly Labrador retrievers—have

proven to be life-changing for the children and their families. They not only help with public situations and interactions, but assist the children by lying across their laps or bodies to help regulate their sensory system if they're feeling dysregulated. The dogs are happy with getting hugs for extended periods, as well as being brushed, petted and having their ears rubbed, which helps refocus the kids.

"Their relationship is built on a love so strong that words are never needed."

One girl had such challenges being in public that her family could no longer attend church together, and she had to be home-schooled. But after partnering with a Good Dog, she's back in school and can go "anywhere," to Laura's delight.

Bedtimes used to be a challenge.

Now, Henry is eager to get in bed to snuggle with his Good Dog! a grateful parent messaged Laura her thanks.

Their relationship is not built on words but instead, a love so strong that words are never needed, another mother enthused.

Dude is at Alexandra's side at every book reading as she lives her dream to be a famous author, despite her autism, read another note.

Other kids are preparing to go to college! Elliot, now 23 and a high school graduate, is himself considering college, and while 13-year-old Orbit has retired as a service animal, he is a much-loved family pet, who is always there to encourage his best pal.

"After Elliot was diagnosed, it felt so hard to be part of a world that didn't understand what our life is like," Laura says. "Now, we're surrounded by people who completely understand our life, and we understand what their life is like. This community is unbelievable. It feels like a gift." —Jen Reeder

3 loving ways to support kids with autism!

1 Grant a wish Go to AutismWish.org, click "Grant A Wish," then click "Start Granting Wishes" to fulfill a child's wish for sensory, therapeutic and special interest items from their individual Amazon wish lists. You'll help make a significant impact on their lives as they learn new skills.

2 Host a fundraiser Visit FlutieFoundation.org, click "Take Action," "Host Your Own Fundraiser," then "Contact Us" to raise funds to give children with autism the opportunity to participate in adaptive programs like water sports, receive grants for assistive technology and build accessible playgrounds to enjoy.

3 Be an advocate Check out AutismSpeaks.org, click "Get Involved," click "Advocate," then "Join Now" to join the Grassroots Advocacy Network that raises awareness for autism and advocates for positive change. Be part of local events and opportunities to be a voice for children with autism!



We'd love to print your inspiring story! Email the story with your name, phone number and a current photo to: WWFeatures@WomansWorldMag.com. Or mail it to: Scoop, *Woman's World*, 270 Sylvan Ave., Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632. By submitting your story, you are granting *Woman's World* permission to use it and your photo in the print magazine, on our website and/or in future special issue publications. Due to a high volume, we are unable to return submissions received.