

Puppy Love

By Mike Andrelczyk | Photography by Vinny Tennis



Brian Gerber sits at his dining room table at his home in Lancaster. It's a beautiful wooden table complete with intricately turned legs. Gerber made this table himself years ago, along with cabinets, benches, a four-poster bed and other pieces of high-quality furniture.

In the center of the table there are bottles of pills.

These days, due to complications from diabetes, Gerber, who was also born with polio, is legally blind and missing much of the use of his hands. His shoulder muscles have severely atrophied and he is a double above-the-knee-amputee, restricted to a wheelchair. He is unable to pursue his woodworking passion. In fact, due to severe osteoporosis, he cannot pick up his iPhone himself if he drops it.

Luckily, Gerber is surrounded by a loving support group of family and friends. And one of his best friends is Deora – a 5-year-old English chocolate Lab. She cannot only gently pick up his iPhone for him (without even scratching the screen), but she can operate light switches, open automatic doors, hand him his towel after a shower and, most importantly, be a loving companion for him while his wife and daughter are at work.

"She'll actually come up on my lap and snuggle with me," Gerber says. "She'll put her front paws up on my chair and I can wrap my arms around her and she'll just snuggle with me. She's a very good snuggler."

Deora doesn't just provide Gerber with friendship, protection and the aid that is essential to his well-being. She gives him a sense of responsibility too.

"It's on me to feed her in the morning. It's on me to feed her supper. It's on me to take her out when she needs to go. I play with her," Gerber says. "She keeps me busy, so I'm not bored during the day. She's been awesome."

Deora is definitely awesome. She is friendly and loyal. Attentive and

happy. Smart and playful. Deora is Gerber's second service dog. His first, an American yellow Lab named Caleb, died of cancer when he was only 7 years old.

"When Caleb passed it was such a gut-wrenching loss for me," Gerber says. "I wasn't sure that I wanted another dog right away. It was very heartbreaking for me. But within a month, I decided I need that companionship, I need that help."

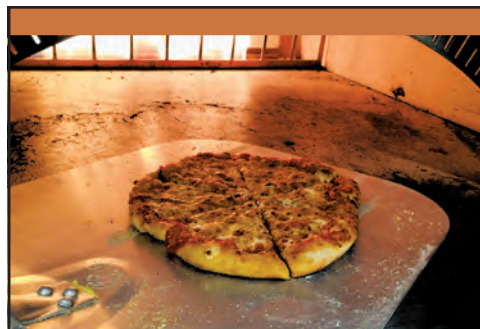
Deora came to Gerber from United Disability Services in Lancaster. She is specially trained just for him. They bonded instantly upon meeting each other.

Service dogs go through vigorous training from the time they are puppies until they are about 2 years old. They begin their training in a state correctional facility in Somerset. After initial training, the dogs are matched with their people and go through another round of training so that they are able to attend to their owner's specific needs.

Deora is a special dog. Her name is actually a tribute. She is named after Deora Frances Bodley, the youngest person to die during the 9/11 attacks, when she and the 39 others on Flight 93 crashed in Shanksville. The Flight 93 monument is located less than a dozen miles from the correctional facility in Somerset where Deora was trained.

Before Deora and Caleb, Gerber says he suffered from mild depression. All that changed when he got his service dogs. Seeing him with Deora, it's obvious that she brings him immense joy and unconditional love. He's now able to meet new people when he's out with Deora. She makes him laugh. She makes him happy.

"I have a deep faith in God. I have lots of friends. My whole circle of friends basically is from church," Gerber says. "The Bible says God is the giver of all things good and I look at Deora as one of those good things in my life. That's how I make it through."



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