

Deb Felkamp of Woodstock and her dog Brodie answer questions about the Canine Companions for Independence program during the Chicagoland Family Pet Show in Arlington Heights. Every year, the Felkamps raise a new puppy for CCI, which places the animals with disabled individuals.



After year together, Woodstock woman must let go

Deb Felkamp of Woodstock knows that this is the end; she's been here before.

In a cramped auditorium near Columbus, Ohio, she listens to stories of how service animals change people's lives. She knows this firsthand because dogs have changed hers.

As the emotional testimonies unfold, Brodie sits quietly beneath Deb's chair.

"I think he knows something is up," Deb said. "He's been very cuddly lately and he's not a very cuddly dog usually."

The next day Deb and Brodie will part ways; it is a day they have been working toward for more than a year.

Brodie, a black Labrador retriever, is part of the Canine Companions for Independence program.

The nonprofit group places service animals with nonblind disabled people to increase their independence.

The dogs go through various training phases, and the first step is to live with a volunteer puppy-raiser family, such as the Felkamps.

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Even sitting at home, Brodie and Deb are connected. This trains Brodie for what life might be like with a disabled person.

National program

Brodie is just one of the service dogs involved in Canine Companions for Independence.

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• STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHRIS BIRKS / THE NORTHWEST HERALD •

Brodie

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Deb and Brodie first met in June 2001. Though he would be her fifth CCI dog, she fell for him immediately.

"(He was) a cute little black 8-week-old puppy, how can he not be adorable?" she said.

She taught him simple commands — "sit," "here" and "wait" — before starting formal classes. But more important, Brodie learned to be with Deb all the time.

Sitting at her home computer or eating her lunch, Deb always is in control of Brodie's leash. The doorbell ringing becomes a chance for Brodie to practice sitting and waiting. These things help Brodie learn what his life will be like with a disabled person.

"It's not like you go to obedience class and work with them for 20 minutes. You're with this dog 24 hours a day," Deb said.

Like many other families, the Felkamps attend First United Methodist Church in Woodstock; the biggest difference is the dog asleep beneath their pew. During Communion, Brodie gets up and walks to the front of the church with Deb and waits on the floor as she kneels near the altar.

"Lots of times, you hear comments from people when you're leaving, saying, 'I didn't know there was a dog in here.' To me, that's one of the best comments you can receive because

"I hope I'm teaching my children some good values; it's OK to give up something you love in order to help somebody else. Once you've said that goodbye, you want him to do the best he can. 'Make your mom proud,' I tell him."

Deb Felkamp

'Mom' of Brodie, who one day may help a disabled person

you and the dog have obviously done your job," Deb said.

Obedience is key for CCI dogs, so Brodie and Deb attend weekly classes at a small farm near Woodstock. They learn basic commands, and Brodie easily succeeds by ignoring the trainer's distracting whistle.

Brodie is a laid-back dog; he remains unfazed as a fly repeatedly lands on his fur. This attitude is exactly right for a dog who will be paired with a disabled person who may move slowly.

Brodie's demeanor is tested when he and Deb sit in the CCI booth at the Chicagoland Family Pet Show at Arlington Park in March. Throngs of people crush past the booth; Brodie is so calm that he goes unnoticed, and visitors nearly step on him.

He glances up from his place on the floor to check for Deb. She is, as always, at the end of his leash.

"I feel more comfortable with that leash in my hand, being able to talk to somebody, than if I didn't (have it)," Deb said. "It's a really

good feeling to be educating the public about (CCI)."

A small Boston terrier wanders toward Brodie, and for the first time, he perks up. Deb notices, but no one else does. She fields questions while she watches Brodie sniff the terrier. After a while, the smaller dog moves on with the crowd.

Brodie has passed another test. With the trust and understanding growing between the two, Deb wants to spread the word about CCI. Many groups, including Deb's church, request volunteers to present information on the service-dog program.

Back at First United Methodist Church, two children sit patiently in the front row during the session. Every few minutes, they look up at their mother, who tells them that they can pet the dog if they wait a little longer. The adults ask what the dogs can do, and the children fidget.

Finally, Deb said it's OK for them to come and pet Brodie, who soon is covered with small hands.

"Good boy," Deb said as Brodie's eyes meet hers.

Nearly a year into Brodie's life with the Felkamps, their sixth CCI puppy arrives. Murphy quickly learns that the wading pool is Brodie's territory.

Brodie stands dominant in the center of the pool, and Murphy squeezes under the deck chairs and waits for his chance to pounce. When Murphy senses a breach in Brodie's concentration, he races into the pool, if only for a moment.

Deb watches them play from a chair on the deck.

"He's a dog. He has to be a dog at some point," she said of Brodie. A letter from CCI's Ohio office arrives in mid-July to thank the puppy raisers. Deb must fill out Brodie's paperwork, and it sinks in that she soon will part ways with her constant companion.

"It's always in the back of your mind that you have to turn them in," she said. "My opinion is that to do the job right, you have to love them, and in the end, it's always hard to give up something you love.

"But it's great to have them for that year."

The CCI center northwest of Columbus will be Brodie's home for the next few months. There, he will get more advanced training before being placed with a disabled person. The duo, along with Deb's daughter, Amanda, check out the facility in August after a nine-hour drive from Woodstock.

In the kennel, Brodie sees his new pen and meets the dog that he will share it with. With a small hug and a little help, Deb lets go of Brodie's leash and places him in the pen. Brodie is more interested in his roommate than Deb and Amanda slipping out of the room.

"I hope I'm teaching my children some good values; it's OK to give up something you love in order to help somebody else," Deb said as she wiped away a tear. "Once you've said that goodbye, you want him to do the best he can. "Make your mom proud," I tell him."

Back in the conference room, a group of puppy raisers share hugs and supportive words before leaving. Deb and Amanda pile into their truck, along with a quiet passenger.

During the commotion, Murphy sits patiently at Amanda's feet. Next year, he will be back at this place, in the kennel room that Brodie now calls home. He also will have the chance to make someone's life complete.

For now, Murphy seems satisfied with his role as the new dog at the end of Deb's leash. "Let's go home," she said.