



STORY AND ILLUSTRATION  
BY CAROLYN ANNE ANDERSON

## The Training of Tyler J. Worthington

**I**n 1991 I was a passenger in an SUV roll-over accident that resulted in a T12-L1 fracture, paralysis, and my becoming a full-time wheelchair user. As most of you know, there aren't a lot of perks to wheelchair life other than occasional good parking and your shoes going out of fashion before you wear them out. However, one of the greatest perks is the right to take your service dog with you everywhere you go.

This is the way I came to participate in a most unique human-canine relationship: I called a local agency in Tucson, Ariz., that assisted people with disabilities in training their own service dogs. At the time I had never even owned a dog, but the lady on the phone said she'd just had a long-distance conversation with a man in Fort Huachuca (south of Tucson) about a purebred 1-year-old Labrador retriever he wanted to donate.

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before, their dog, Tyler, had jumped over the fence to play with the neighbors' Rottweillers — Rommel and Malcolm — who in turn had taken some rather big chunks out of Tyler's face and ears.

When he arrived home to see his pregnant wife struggling to pull two raging Rottweillers off of their dog, he knew with a baby on the way that they didn't have time to properly train the dog. And an untrained, 80-pound, out-of-control dog was becoming hazardous. It's unclear how he acquired the dog, but a story he told led us to believe the lab had flunked out of a military program where they assess puppies to be used as drug-sniffing or bomb-sniffing dogs.

This man loved his dog dearly, and I won't do him the dishonor to say he had tears in his eyes as he smoked a cigarette in the driveway while loading the dog's bed, toys, treats and trunkful of belongings into my car.

Thus began my adventure with Tyler. Now, one would think if the military was not able to train and manage this dog, how was a girl in a wheelchair going to, a girl who knew nothing of dogs or dog ownership? This, however, did not occur to me until I got him home.

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### Welcome Home, Tyler

The moment I arrived, he jumped out of the car, found a dead bird, ran across some inaccessible desert landscaping and looked laughingly at me as he devoured the bird, feathers and all — then ran into my house and barfed it up on the floor.

I tried later to take him out with a leash — fine for the first 30 seconds — until he saw a bunny and ran full speed for it, taking me with him, while my wheelchair stayed put — and I landed smack on the pavement. Tyler ran off gleefully, not even looking back.

Unfortunately, the night he arrived was the fourth of July, and as he managed to shred a screen door and almost broke a window, I discovered he had a severe firecracker phobia.

I called the training organization and the director said classes start in August, if he gets in the program. To which I said, "August? It's July! What I am supposed to do until August? And what do you mean *if* he gets in?"

She then scheduled two trainers to come out and assess the dog, and I personally hired a behavioralist to give me some help managing him.

The first thing on everyone's list to improve behavior was to get him fixed. One of the requirements for service dog training is proof of sterilization and a temperament assessment clearance signed by a veterinarian. So I brought the form and the dog to the vet the day of the operation. I guess in the past five years of being in practice, this particular vet had never been bitten. So of course Tyler took a good chunk out of

his arm while he attempted to sedate him for the gonadectomy. Consequently, the vet refused to sign the waiver and verify that Tyler had a temperament suitable for a service dog.

Since they had facilitated the match, I pleaded with the organization to have him in the class, and I was at my wits' end. Tyler was destroying my rented apartment. One of his favorite things to do was pull a book off a shelf and shred it to pieces. Another favorite was pens. I came home one night to a blue-ink-spatter white couch. "Tyler! Did you do this!?" He lovingly looked at me — his coffee table-clearing baseball bat of a tail thumping wildly — and smiled, baring dark blue ink-stained teeth, as if to say, "Who, me?"

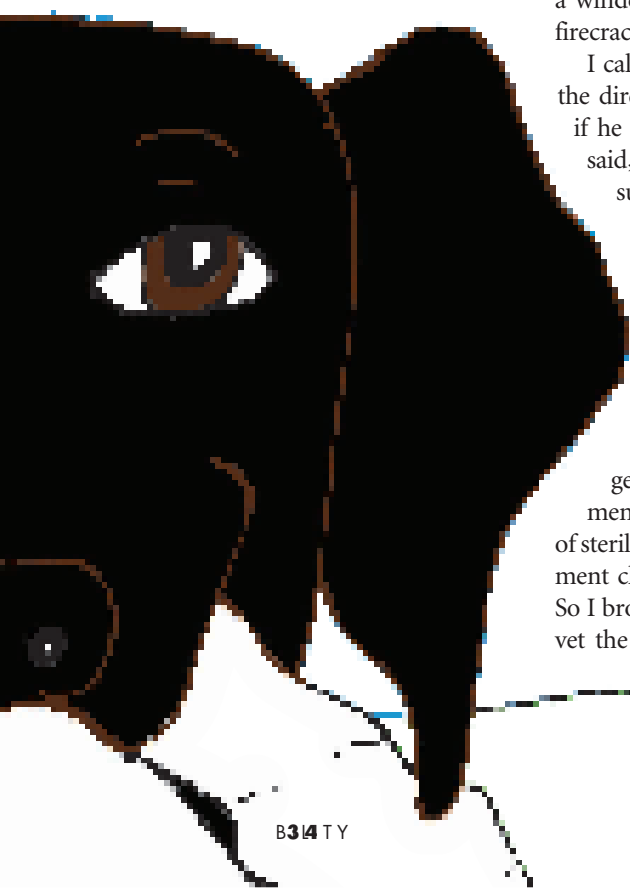
He loved to grab toilet paper and run, darting in and around furniture, and if he came to a point where the tissues intersected, he'd take a break and wildly shred it, before returning to his maze construction, stopping to go back in and take long drinks out of the toilet, leaving huge clots of toilet paper in the pot. And sometimes deciding those soggy paper balls would look better in the kitchen. I would often return home to find dried toilet paper clots stuck to his jowls.

After creating a schedule with my friends and neighbors to help me walk and exercise him for that month, the day of dog school finally arrived, where I met a miracle worker/dog trainer named Rosemary Besenick.

And so began the training of Tyler J. Worthington.

### How I Came to Own \$80 Worth of Thong Underpants

One of the first things I was given in service dog training school was a device called a Gentle Leader, a halter type of collar that slips over the dog's snout in a way that if a dog pulls, its head is forced down — similar in function to a horse's halter — instead of spreading the pull across his neck like a standard or choke collar, where most dogs have a lot of strength. This ingenious little strap of nylon gave a fairly meek girl in a wheelchair the means to safely walk an 80-pound moose of a dog without again being pulled out of my



wheelchair face first.

The benefit from the Leader was incredible, and with time he learned that once the Leader was on, he became a service dog, and he instantly calmed down and became aware — after about two years of training. Yet even after years of wearing his Leader, he always fussed with the strap across his snout. Whenever we stopped for a prolonged period of time, like a college lecture, work, or some place where he'd be in the same spot for awhile, he would begin rubbing his face back and forth on the floor, knowing if he did it at just the right angle, he could slip the Leader off. Which to him meant “off duty.” When he did this, he'd look up with a satisfied full-mouth dog smile of accomplishment — and then would come the sloppy slobbery wrestling match to try and get the head collar back on so I could walk him again with control.

This was a constant thing our whole time together. I knew when he was about to do it, and if I caught him, I'd say, “Hey, buddy, not now,” and slip him a little

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treat — and he'd hang and be all right. But if I didn't catch him, all bets were off once he got the Gentle Leader off.

He started dog school in August, and by Christmastime he was ready for me to take him on our first outings together, wearing his “Please don't pet me, I am in training” vest. I was shopping in the mall

at Victoria's Secret during the holiday season, and it was intensely crowded with a huge line. I was waiting behind a curvy woman who had in her hands the world's largest Cinnabon. She was talking loudly with her boyfriend and slowly tearing off little pieces of her Cinnabon and eating them in a very flirty way.

It wasn't clear if her boyfriend was buying something for her or she was pulling out all the stops to be sure he picked up the tab before they left the store, or if whatever they purchased was to be donned soon, which produced tension between the two. I felt for the guy. Several times he did a Rodney Dangerfield collar-tie pull and had goosebumps all up and down his arms. I might also mention he was a handsome 40-something. She was all of 20, maybe, and everyone in line was aware that she had previously purchased a push-up miracle bra, which was currently on display under her plunging neckline.

Tyler was sitting beside me in perfect service dog form, attentively watching

each piece of Cinnabon being torn off and eaten. She was the kind of girl who talks a lot with her hands, and the pieces of bun would go back and forth, along with a giggle, and a hair flip, and a pat on her boyfriend's leg, and back to the bun — Tyler watching it all like a tennis match — his face turning, hoping she would decide to flick a sweet sticky bit his way. The process of his attentiveness excited that Pavlovian response dogs

are famous for, and soon the drool was building up on his jowls and the suspended streams swayed from side to side with each volley and serve of the pastry.

At one point the lady looked over and said, "Awww, poor puppy, look at your doggie, so hungry ..." and Tyler's light went on, hearing someone using the "doggy voice." At that point Tyler approached her. "Can I give the dog some?" she asked me, in a non-doggy

voice. I asked her please, no, he's on a special diet (one that didn't include Cinnabons).

"Ohhhh, who's a good puppy," she offered, then asked me the trifecta of dog questions: "Is that a Labrador? Is he yours or are you training him for someone blind? What does he do for you?"

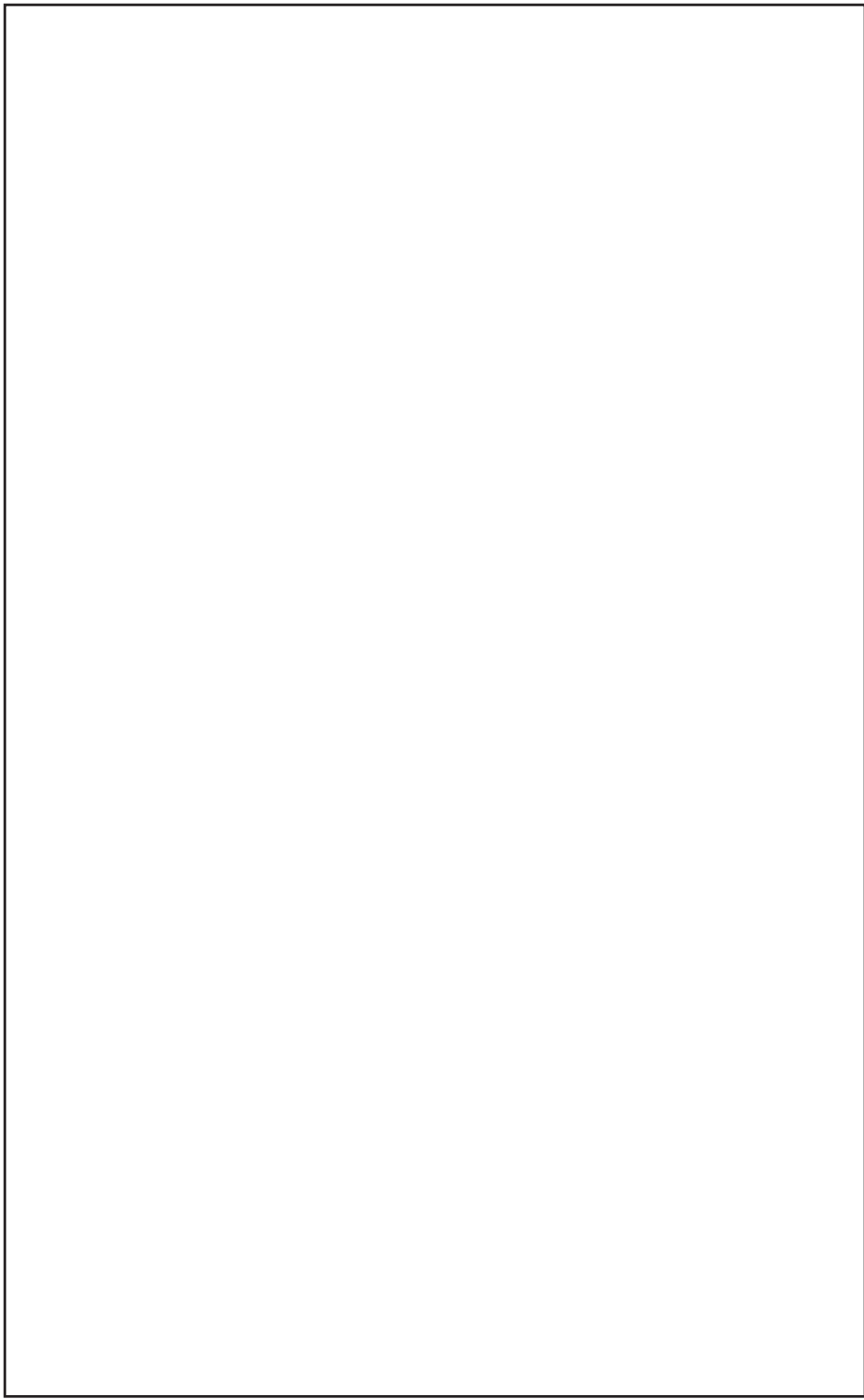
The third question always presents an opportunity for a total smartass comeback, depending on how I feel about humanity on any given day. But this day I settled with, "He's a good companion for me." To which she glanced at the long grandma-ish nightgown at the top of my pile — actually a gift for my mother — and gave me a sympathetic sigh and a kind look.

The lady at the front of the line was making some sort of return that the 17-year-old sales clerk could not figure out, and that froze the computer sys-

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tem, so the line wasn't going anywhere. After not hearing the doggy voice for a few minutes, Tyler realized he probably wasn't getting any Cinnabon and decided to lie down. And at that moment I knew — it had been long enough — so he perked up his head and was going to try the Leader-removal-face-plant dance.

I had to fight back because I knew that if Tyler got his Gentle Leader off he was going right for that Cinnabon, and there would be nothing me, flirty girl, or Mr.



40-something could do about it. It would be devoured — paper plate and all — before I could yell, “Heel!”

Butt in the air, he began the face rub, back and forth. “Oh, your puppy has an itchy face,” says flirty girl. I ignore her and pull the leash taut, thinking, “Enough, I’ll bail,” but behind me the line had grown, and there were all these plastic shopping baskets on the floor alongside waiting customers, thus causing a complicated, if not impossible, exit. And the itchy face comment in doggy voice had started the drooling again, and the return of the bun hope resulted in even more drool. Determined, head down, Tyler resumed rubbing. Nearby were three large wicker baskets about 3 feet tall and 16 inches in diameter that were filled to the brim with thong underwear — small, medium and large. Tyler was doing this sort of diving action, where he’d stand up and then plop down his front portion, swaying side to side. In one swoop he knocked over a wicker basket that was overflowing with thong underpants, size small. Then in a second lunge he knocked over the other two baskets, continuing to rub his face back and forth, not even seeming to notice the addition of all the panties on the floor.

But at some point he did become aware of them, and it seemed he was finding quite a bit of enjoyment in the textures and smells of underpants tried on by who knows what portion of humanity. And I was pretty much boxed in — nowhere to go until the line moved. Thankfully, at that moment, flirty girl completed her purchase, and the clerk waved me forward. I tried to tidy the mess but ended up getting stringy panties rolled up in my front casters, and a staff person came to help as I pulled as hard as I could trying to control Tyler, who now had his Leader off and was continuing to rub his face all over the panties. And then he flipped on his back, doing a happy-dog back scratch, four paws in the air, back and forth on all the butt floss. In a moment of inspiration I said to Miss Flirty, “Hey, I’ll take you up on that Cinnabon offer,” and she tore me off a bit.

“Hey, Tyler,” I said, and he immediately stopped rolling on his back and came to attention. But when he did, he

had four thong bikinis strewn about his large dog face, each coated in dog slobber.

A woman came up to me and said, “Aren’t these dogs supposed to be trained?” To which I replied, “He’s in training, so sorry.”

“Can I help you, ma’am?” the cashier asked.

I quickly handed her my purchase and said, “Oh, and I’ll take these,” and removed the slobber-soaked panties

from Tyler’s face.

And at that moment Tyler attempted another face-first dive into the panty pile. I held the leash with all my might, and Mr. 40-something looked Tyler right in the eyes and said, “Man, I am right there with ya, buddy. Good dog. Good boy!”

And then came an incredible awkward silence while I waited for my credit card approval to cover my purchase, plus \$80 worth of thongs. M