



A Winning Combination

Pat Matuszak

When Jill Oosterbaan zips across campus at Calvin College, doors literally fly open to admit her. That's because she was given a special electronic door opener that most of the buildings' entrances are designed to respond to. Keeping up with her is a challenge even for her golden retriever Fozzie, who appears to be in top form from accompanying her to all of her activities. Fozzie is a trained Service Dog who helps Jill by turning on lights, fetching pop from the fridge and picking up things she cannot reach from her wheelchair.

Getting around wasn't always this easy for her. Her childhood memories are filled with days when both physical doors, and the doors of opportunity, were closed to her. She still fights an outward battle with physical disabilities caused by her body's internal battle with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis. Although she won "the war" physically and the disease is in an inactive state, she must cope with the results of multiple lost battles when JRA assaulted her body as a young child leaving her isolated from her peers.

"The first day the doctor thought it was a viral infection," explains her mother, Lois. Jill experienced the first symptoms as a three-year-old living in Spring Lake. "I remember it hurt to walk," she recalls, "then everything hurt and I had a 'scratchy' looking rash and a fever of 104°."

The doctors quickly realized it was not just another virus, and she began the first of many hospital stays with the same symptoms returning to rob her of more mobility each time. During each episode, her mother faithfully sat by her bedside until the crisis was over and encouraged her to keep up the painful physical therapy that followed. She described the difficult days: "The frustrating thing was that all of the progress she made in



Jill and Fozzie make a great team.

physical therapy could be lost when she had a new flare-up, and she would have to start all over again."

For eight years her childhood days were occupied with trying new therapies and drugs, such as non-aspirin analgesics, steroids and even injections of gold. In JRA the body's own defenses are thought to destroy the cartilage that lines the joints, and even attack organs such as the liver and the heart. Jill's case was severe and she had complications to her heart that most JRA victims

don't suffer. In many cases, the symptoms are controllable and the disease eventually goes into an inactive state where no further damage is done.

Jill finally reached the plateau where no more damage would occur, but not before she lost her ability to walk and use her hands for such tasks as writing. These physical limitations, coupled with many absences from school due to flare-ups and the general fatigue that is a frequent JRA symptom,

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caused her problems academically. Her school district had few options available to the physically challenged; she was assigned to their program for the mentally impaired until she reached high school.

This made it difficult for her to relate to a regular classroom situation and students, and she is still growing in self-confidence socially. "Not being mainstreamed early on was a disadvantage," she explains. Today most elementary schools follow a policy that encourages physically challenged students to be integrated into standard classroom situations whenever possible. Jill feels that this is a positive trend that should continue.

She likes to be as independent as possible and chose Calvin over some other colleges because the campus is designed with physically challenged students in mind through its use of elevators, ramps and electronic doors. Each class provides a volunteer who is willing to take notes with a sheet of carbon paper underneath so Jill can unobtrusively have a copy.

Just as she has found fewer barriers physically, she has also faced fewer obstacles socially. "College has been easier socially, there are fewer cliques and people are more mature." She is currently a teacher aide at Creston Christian Elementary School as part of her preparation for a degree in elementary and special education. And, of course, Fozzie is welcome wherever she goes. "He is a certified Service Dog and allowed to go everywhere," she declares with just a hint of pride. His rowdy grin is an instant social icebreaker, but he looks strangers over with great care before allowing them near Jill.

Her mom agrees that the presence of a constant helper and guard dog these past three years has made her feel more at ease about Jill being away at school. "Of course, that's what we always wanted for her, to become as independent as possible," Lois

explains. Jill credits her mom with providing consistent strength during her hospital stays and recuperations: "She was positive, courageous . . . just being there is so important. Even if there is nothing you can do to stop the pain . . . it's all that matters, just showing that love and support."

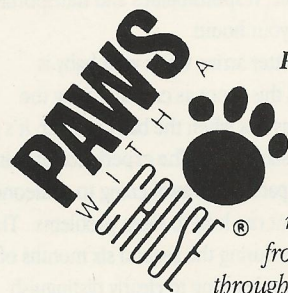
Jill's pain was so terrible that sometimes it overshadowed the needs her mom had for time for herself. "When someone you love is in need, you forget about yourself," Lois explains. "If I knew someone in the same situation, I'd advise them to remember to take some time out for themselves occasionally."

It was difficult for Lois to follow that advice, and she was grateful for friends who prayed for her family and offered to help. "If you know someone like this, I'd say to offer them some definite help, like a hot dinner or babysitting so that they could have time away. And if friends say to let them know if there is anything they can do, take them up on it! Don't be afraid to get specific."

Brothers and sisters also need to be watched for signs that they are losing track of their need for personal attention. Some hesitate to ask or admit that they have a need when they sense that their parents are so tired from caring for an intensely ill family member. They may also think that their problems are comparatively minor.

Accepting help and support from available sources is a key to keeping family life running smoothly. When friends and relatives step in to care for the ill member, the rest of the family can have time to take care of the little things that go unheeded during a health crisis. Private time and time spent with other family members is equally important. Finally, seeking out a support group or forming one, can help families to verbalize concerns with others who will understand.

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PAWS With A Cause® is a national non-profit, community-based organization which identifies ways to develop mutually beneficial working relationships between people with disabilities and dogs. The golden retriever Fozzie, highlighted in "HomeFront" (p. 9), was a PAWS® rescued dog. Since 1979 over 500 dogs have been rescued from certain death at Animal Shelters and Humane Societies throughout Michigan.

PAWS is proud to announce a new "Save The Strays" program designed to give "throw away" pets a new "leash" on life. PAWS is in need of at least 25 "Foster Homes" in West Michigan to participate in this new program. Participating "Foster Homes" would be asked to provide a loving and stimulating environment for PAWS rescued dogs for approximately one to three months. At that time, the dogs will start their formal training at the Corporate Training Center.

If your family is interested in providing a "Foster Home" or would like more information, please contact (616) 698-0688.