



Episode 54- Service Dogs, Inc. – Paws with a Purpose

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Mindy Henderson: Welcome to the Quest Podcast, proudly presented by the Muscular Dystrophy Association as part of the Quest family of content. I'm your host, Mindy Henderson. Together, we are here to bring thoughtful conversation to the neuromuscular disease community and beyond about issues affecting those with neuromuscular disease and other disabilities and those who love them.

We are here for you to educate and inform, to demystify, to inspire and to entertain. We are here shining a light on all that makes you, you. Whether you are one of us, love someone who is, or are on another journey altogether. Thanks for joining. Now, let's get started.

Sheri Soltes founded Service Dogs, Inc in 1988 on the concept of using dogs rescued from animal shelters. Under her guidance, SDI has led the industry in combining the use of all rescue dogs with positive reinforcement training methodology. In 2023, Sheri served as new chair of Assistance Dogs International North America or ADINA. She chaired the ADINA Legislative and Advocacy Committee from 2018 to 2022. Her work contributed to the revisions of the Air Carrier Access Act, making air travel safer for passengers traveling with service dogs.

Sheri has mentored assistance dog programs around the world, including Australia, Japan, Spain, Chile, and has been a featured speaker at many conferences and institutions. Her articles on the legal rights of assistance dog

users have been published by Assistance Dogs International, the International Association of Assistance Dog Partners and Leader Dogs for the Blind.

She drafted the 1995 revisions for Texas Assistance Dog Accessibility Statute. And in 2023, Austin Business Journal selected Sheri as a finalist in their Women in Business Awards and their CEO Awards among other things. Sheri, it's so good to have you with me. Thank you for joining.

Sheri Soltes: I'm thrilled to be here. I can't wait to have a great chat with you.

Mindy Henderson: Well, thank you. You personally have a really interesting backstory. I know that you were an attorney and you pivoted away from that work to create this organization. Take us through that. How did that happen?

Sheri Soltes: Well, I had been a trial lawyer in Houston and I was finding it stressful. It's very combative. And this was before the internet, but my stomach started hurting and I went to see the doctor and he said, "Well, here's some pills, but this is usually caused by stress." So I never took the pills. I just started looking for something different to pursue and found an article in a magazine at check-out at the grocery store about dogs that help people with disabilities.

And at the very end of the article, it said some of the groups use dogs adopted from animal shelters. And I like rescuing things, so that was what caught my interest. And little by little, I transitioned from being a lawyer to working with the service dog industry, and now it's been almost 40 years and it's been very rewarding.

Mindy Henderson: Fantastic. And you and I have quite a long history. I've known you for a long time. I worked with your organization years ago as an intern coming out of college and then received a service dog from you, my beloved Jenny, who is no longer with us, but she lived a long and happy life with me as a happy little service dog.

And one of the things that drew me to your organization was just what you talked about, your philosophy on finding dogs and your training methods. Will you tell us a little bit more about both of those things and why they're so important to you and what you've seen in terms of their effectiveness?

Sheri Soltes: Sure. We're one of maybe fewer than a handful of groups globally that use dogs adopted from animal shelters, including mixed breeds and mixes of mixes. Last year, our success rate was 100%. Every dog we adopted went through the program, and that was after adopting 40% more. So we're a medium-sized organization. The groups that breed will say they have 30% success, maybe 50. The rest of those dogs have to be absorbed by the community.

We've combined that with positive training, which the industry's finally starting to think about it. We've been doing it for over 30 years because guess what?

When you train something without hurting it and making it afraid of you, it's more successful. So we've also emphasized enrichment. So when the dog is not in a training session, there are staff that are taking the dogs on walks, playing games with them, having a relationship session where they're both just chilling and petting and being calm.

So that way the dogs are not subject to kennel stress, because they're just shut up in a room by themselves unless it's a training session. So we are trying to give the dogs a wonderful quality of life. When we go to a shelter to select a dog, we are not looking at the breed, we're looking at its temperament or its personality. And we're looking for dogs that like people, and we have four different training programs. We're like the Harry Potter of dogs.

So at Hogwarts or Dogwarts, we have the hearing dogs, the service dogs for folks with mobility issues, courthouse facility dogs and first responder facility dogs. So depending on what we're looking for, mainly hearing and service, we might set off a timer and see if the dog's interested in sound, throw a toy and see if the dog wants to retrieve. But if they pass the temperament test, we'll adopt them. We don't care about the breed. So I like to say it's just like your co-workers. If you can do the job, we don't care who your parents are.

So think of your favorite band, the Beatles or whatever, if you're younger, whoever, we don't know who their parents are and we don't care. We just like what they do. And when you use training that's based on a good relationship and trust, then the dog will become heroic if it needs to. We've had dogs where the human person part of the partnership passed out or was in some kind of emergency and the dog has to problem-solve on its own. It had to think of how to fix the situation when we hadn't specifically trained it for that, like a gentleman passed out and fell into a bathtub filling with water, or a lady was knocked out because an outdoor porch swing collapsed and hit her in the head.

And another one, a guy in a power wheelchair, it turned over in the park in the middle of nowhere. And the dog had to go off leash and bring someone back. So if the animals are only doing something because they are trying to avoid you hurting it or punishing it if it makes a mistake, they're less motivated. The guy in the wheelchair that overturned, they're like, "Free at last. See you." And dogs that get punished for making mistakes stay in a tiny box and they don't experiment. They're not creative thinkers because they get punished for it. So they're trying to avoid that.

Mindy Henderson: Interesting.

Sheri Soltes: But we don't do that. The worst thing that happens is you get the opportunity to try again or the trainer will take a minute, think how the trainer can do their job better. It's usually information or motivation. Either the dog doesn't understand what you want, that's you; or whatever you think is a reward, the dog is not interested in, back to you again. So it's like that Monty Python movie where the guy eats the whole giant dinner and the waiter's like, "Have one more mint. Just

one mint." And he doesn't want it, where if you haven't had breakfast all day, you would love to have a mint.

There's I Love Lucy where they're waiting for dinner, it keeps getting delayed, and they eat all the mints. They just scoop the whole bowl. So you have to read what's reinforcing to that animal in that moment. And also, is what you're asking it clear to the dog? So 99.9% of the time, it's the trainer's fault, not the animal, but we like this because unlike trial law, everybody wins. The client gets the dog.

And we train free of charge, which hardly any of the groups do. Even if you're a nonprofit, it's rare that they don't ask the client to either pay thousands of dollars or go run around and fundraise. And we use dogs that need a second chance. So we're very proud of that.

Mindy Henderson: That's amazing. And once you place a dog with a human, do you stay in their lives? Do you continue to be connected to them, checking on the dog and things like that, or is the person flying solo?

Sheri Soltes: We do a lot of extensive one-on-one training. We are unique in that, typically. Also, a lot of groups use the guide dog model where you go take a class for two or three weeks and then you go home with your dog. We have a five-day class at the training center, which is near Austin, Texas in a town called Dripping Springs. Then we move in the dog, and we come to the client's house once a week for at least three months until they can pass the certification exam. That includes public outings, going to your work, and whatever behaviors the dog is doing to help you.

We're accredited by Assistance Dogs International, and so one of the things you have to do for that is we recertify every team annually. When you first get certified, we'll check up on you in three months and six months just to make sure, because that's when everybody has the most questions when they're new, and we always are there to do follow-up. If the person needs an extra behavior, like someone deaf is having a baby, and they want the dog to now alert them to the baby's cry or whatever the situation is, we are always there to help you and the dog.

Or if the client passes away and the dog needs to be adopted or whatever the situation is, we can help with that. If a family member wants a dog, we can talk about that or we'll find a pet home for it. But by the time we've seen the client weekly for at least three months, we have a very strong relationship. So our only goal is to make this successful.

Mindy Henderson: I love that. I'm such an animal person myself. I've adopted all of the animals that I've ever had. And yeah, I think it's absolutely fantastic that that is your mission too. You're not only helping the humans that need what the dog can do for

them, but you're helping the dogs by finding them a home and helping the homeless animal population. I love it.

Sheri Soltes: Absolutely.

Mindy Henderson: Do you know over time how many dogs you've rescued and placed?

Sheri Soltes: Probably over 1,000 at this point.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Sheri Soltes: And if any dog does not complete training, we'll adopt it to a pet home. We never send a dog back to a shelter. So all of the dogs we adopt have a better life, even if they don't become a working dog. But the more experience we get, the more we improve and the more higher percentage of the dogs go all the way through.

Mindy Henderson: I love it. And I do just want to mention, obviously, you... Well, not obviously, but you work in the Texas area, correct?

Sheri Soltes: Yeah. Yes. We serve the state of Texas, and because we're part of Assistance Dogs International, they have a website. So if people live outside of Texas, they can go to Assistance Dogs International's website and look for providers that serve their area.

Mindy Henderson: Love it.

Sheri Soltes: We also don't do every type of assistance dog out there. There are different purposes that we don't train for, and so if somebody has a need that we can't meet or they're in a location we don't serve, they can go to ADI's website and see what they can find.

Mindy Henderson: Great. That's wonderful. The other thing that you've mentioned already, but I want to circle back to it, is the fact that you do provide dogs free of charge to people who need them. How did that become part of your model? Was that always your intention or how did that happen?

Sheri Soltes: That's always been my intention. I figured the client has enough on their shoulders without having to run around and have cupcake sales to raise \$50,000 for a dog. It gives us more control to protect the dog also. That way, we retain ownership. And if a dog is being mistreated or whatever, neglected, we can take the dog back.

Or if the client's noncompliant, which in 37 years, we've done five or fewer times, but once in a while, you need to pull the dog out. So it's for the best interest of the ethics, of the best care of the dog. And we've been lucky to have good community support, because basically I tell our story and if people share

my enthusiasm for it, they want to be part of it because they find it very rewarding or reinforcing on their journey through life too to know they're really making a difference.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. You all have had an event every year for as long as I can remember. You do a giant dog walk. Would you tell us about that event?

Sheri Soltes: Yeah, I'd love to. It has its own website. It's mightytexasdogwalk.org. This is year 25 of doing that. That's our big special event fundraiser. So it's a 2,000-person dog walk. It's basically a parade combined with a doggy trade show. So it's in Austin at a facility called Camp Mabry, which is our little Texas military forces base outdoors.

If you're in Austin, you'll know it because when you drive past it, you see the aircraft models, the helicopters and the aircraft. And you pay a little ticket fee. You come with your dog, you do the walk, you can go visit all the booths and get bags and bags of free samples of dog food and treats, and there's training groups out there and boarding groups and a lot of veterinary practices with free advice. We try to win a Guinness World Record every year because it zhuzhes it up.

So we've won Most Dogs Walked. We beat Canada and England, although England cheats. We beat England for Biggest Cake for Dogs. Theirs was weighed in the metric system. It was some metric thing. So we have no way of really knowing what it weighed, but we estimate our 300-pound cake weighed more than theirs. Some engineers deciphered their kilometers or whatever they use and whatever English weight is, but ours was better.

It was baked by the Austin Pastry Guild. It was a giant dog bone made out of baked dog food and stuff. And then the frosting... You're looking like that's not appetizing, but it is. The frosting was-

Mindy Henderson: I'm sure the dogs loved it.

Sheri Soltes: ... instant mashed potatoes. Well, not only the dogs, the roadies liked it. The cleanup crew was eating it, and they kept saying, "Gee, this is salty for a cake." It's like, "That's dog food, but okay."

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Sheri Soltes: Yeah, bless their hearts. We won one year for Biggest Coloring Book. We beat China. One of our clients works for a billboard company, so they printed the coloring book on the big billboard vinyls. And a couple of years ago, we beat England for World's Biggest Dog Bowl. It was 15 feet across and you could park a Subaru in it. And sometimes it's most dogs wearing the same bandana. Oh, my favorite is one I created that has not been challenged. We hold the Guinness World Record for two years in a row for World's Biggest Fur Ball.

Mindy Henderson: Ooh.

Sheri Soltes: Yeah.

Mindy Henderson: Gross.

Sheri Soltes: We commissioned, or I did. Yeah, gross. Thank you. That's ego-dystonic. A giant sphere, like a snow globe with a hole in it. And we had a \$3 carpet from Party City. And you walked the red carpet, brush your dog and put the fur in the globe, and then we weighed it. We had already weighed the gloves, so we subtracted that. I can ethically say there was no cat hair that I know of, even though I have 11 cats and the one in the attic or whatever's up there. So it was 315 pounds of dog hair and it has not been challenged.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Sheri Soltes: Yeah, classy.

Mindy Henderson: That is one of the most creative things I've ever heard.

Sheri Soltes: It's simple, it's visual, and it's slightly disgusting. So that's how we roll. So because we do a Guinness World Record, now we have costume contests that we've added. It's more than just a typical charity event. It's a lot of fun and people do it every year.

Mindy Henderson: That's fantastic.

Sheri Soltes: So last year, our theme was pajama party, so we had 2,000 people in their pajamas walking their dogs like Walmart. And then this year it's Renaissance, because it's right around when the Texas Renaissance Festival is, so we'll have a lot of lords and ladies-

Mindy Henderson: Love it.

Sheri Soltes: ... walking, promenading with their dogs. And we'll allow Middle Ages themes too because I'm not a monster. But everybody says Renaissance and what they come up with is Middle Ages, like King Arthur, but two different things.

Mindy Henderson: Not exactly.

Sheri Soltes: But that's not what we're here to talk about, I don't think.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah, do your research.

Sheri Soltes: But we could. Yeah, Renaissance is Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and all that. Middle Ages is King Arthur, who's not even real, and Lancelot and all of that. But it's all good.

Mindy Henderson: So make sure to get your costumes straight, y'all, is what Sheri is saying.

Sheri Soltes: Well, I'll be silently judging you, but we actually do the costume contest on audience applause. So my vote does not count.

Mindy Henderson: Okay, okay.

Sheri Soltes: But if you do win in the costume contest, you get a giant tacky gold trophy that's about five feet tall.

Mindy Henderson: Great.

Sheri Soltes: It's bigger than a lot of children.

Mindy Henderson: Who doesn't need one of those?

Sheri Soltes: At least. Yeah. We have one group, the Mighty Mutts, they start sewing their costumes the minute they hear the theme and they've won every year but one. So there are a lot of determined women. We had Furry Tales one time, which was like fairy tales, but they had about eight dogs dressed all like Alice in Wonderland, the Mad Hatter and the Queen of Hearts and all that. It was very cute.

Mindy Henderson: So fun.

Sheri Soltes: They cleaned up.

Mindy Henderson: So fun. Well, we're going to make sure that not only your organization's website, but that the dog walk website gets put into the show notes so people can find it. So let me pivot just a little bit and talk about what a service dog can do for you.

And you mentioned earlier there are a few different kinds of service dogs, but most of our listeners have mobility-related disabilities. What are some of the ways a service dog can be of assistance to, let's start with wheelchair users in particular with limited mobility?

Sheri Soltes: I'm just going to use the term service dog as a dog that helps somebody with a mobility-related disability. The main thing they're doing is retrieving. They're either retrieving things that you drop or things that you are indicating like, "I can't reach that thing. I didn't drop it, but I still can't reach it."

And we have them deliver it to your lap. So if you don't have enough use of your arms to reach out and take something, the dog is going to retrieve it to your lap. When we match somebody with a dog, we don't just say, "Well, you're next and this dog's next. That's it." We match the dog that fits your size and your wheelchair, your lifestyle, your preferences, if you have a male or female

preference or a coat. We can't do everything about, "I want a polka dot dog that sings Dixie."

Mindy Henderson: That's the one I want.

Sheri Soltes: Yeah, that's the one you want. That's the one you have. But some people, like one woman was in sales and she was on the go a lot, so we had an Australian Shepherd with her because it's a herding dog and it likes to be on the go where somebody else might be somebody who's at a desk all day and is more sedentary, and that dog has to be comfortable, chilling until the person needs something.

Other behaviors are based on tug: tugging open a door, tugging open the refrigerator and getting something out of it for you, tugging off a jacket or a sock. One woman had rheumatoid arthritis and she couldn't unzip her hoodie, but we had an extra-long tab on the zipper, and the dog could pull the zipper down and help her take the rest of the little sweatshirt thing and she could shrug out of it.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, cool.

Sheri Soltes: So we can build custom behaviors that the person wants. Nudging things. If your arm or leg falls off the armrest or the footrest of the wheelchair, the dog can nudge it back up into position. Close a dishwasher, close a drawer. Some people want help with their laundry. They can't reach all the stuff at the back of the dryer so the dog can get the clothes out and put it in a laundry basket for you.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Sheri Soltes: And then you can attach a cord or an old necktie to the laundry basket and the dog can pull it for you.

Mindy Henderson: That's brilliant. That's really, really cool.

Sheri Soltes: That one, one of our clients came up with, and then we started doing it. So the clients basically become trainers themselves, and you have the tools to put together new behaviors. And sometimes if a client comes up with a cool behavior, we'll start training it too.

Mindy Henderson: Very nice. One of the things about muscle weakness with a neuromuscular condition is pretty standard. Not everyone with a neuromuscular disease is a wheelchair user. Some remain ambulatory but maybe have some stability issues or things like that. Can you train a service dog to help a person brace themselves as they're getting up out of a chair, things like that?

Sheri Soltes: Yes. We do a behavior where the dog steadies itself, and you can brace over their shoulders and hips, I call it your little support beams. Not in the small of its

back. It's not like a horse where you would touch it where you would put a saddle because they're not equines. But their shoulders and over their hips, you can boost to transfer from one thing to the other, from the floor to a chair, from the chair to the toilet, in and out of the tub, those things.

If someone's walking, they wouldn't use the dog for weight-bearing. We did that once, and it's just too much stress on the dog physiologically. But they can counterbalance you. So we just graduated somebody who has multiple sclerosis, and Diane and Jaguar, it's in our... I think I said MD, but she has MS. Whatever it is, I got it backwards. But she's gone from using a wheelchair to a walker to a cane to pretty much nothing, because a dog can counterbalance you and they can steady you.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Sheri Soltes: And we try to adapt that to what the individual client needs.

Mindy Henderson: That's really cool. And because of the muscle weakness that the neuromuscular community so often deals with, what would you say to someone who wonders if they could control or hold on to their service dog while they're out in public walking down the street or what have you?

Sheri Soltes: Well, that's what we're training for. We're not going to put you with a dog that is going to put your safety at risk. And we are going to be working with you weekly and you have homework to do, and we build up two complicated environments a little bit at a time. So the first place you might be healing with your dog is your hallway where there are not a lot of distractions, and then maybe your backyard.

So you work up a little at a time. We don't ever use a metal collar or anything painful, but we might use a head halter, which is like a horse halter, if that would help. If they're in a chair, obviously we can put something on the chair and you can loop the dog's leash over that. So if you're in a chair, especially a power chair, it can become the anchor for the dog. And again, we're trying to match the person with the dog that fits their needs.

So if somebody is more fragile on their feet, we would make sure that dog is super focused on them and not one of our boy athlete dogs that's more likely to be too strong for someone that's fragile. But we don't certify anybody until they can do all the behaviors themselves, and we'll keep at it until you're at that level.

Mindy Henderson: That's really cool. I love talking about dogs so much. So then what about for a person who again, maybe has limited arm strength, limited dexterity with respect to getting the leash on the dog or the harness or whatever the dog might need? How do you work around that?

Sheri Soltes: We try figure it out with the person, one client at a time and customize it for them. So far, over all this time, we've figured it out one way or another. Sometimes they have someone that can help them or we can pre-hook some stuff up or use Velcro or a different kind of fastener.

And treat delivery can be adapted too. When we work with someone who has a spinal cord injury that has a lot of quadriplegia, there are workarounds, like a little gadget that they can boot with their phone or something and it pops a treat to the dog.

Mindy Henderson: Oh, cool.

Sheri Soltes: So whatever the situation is, we'll try to have a way to figure it out. And the dogs also are very patient with treat delivery. The thing that helps us is it's based on using a clicker, but we use the word yes to bridge. Right when the dog does what you want, you say yes quickly, and then the dog knows a reward is coming. So if you get that yes out, that marks a behavior, they'll wait for you to get a piece of kibble and give it to them.

Mindy Henderson: I see.

Sheri Soltes: We had a client years ago. This was in the '80s. Well, let's say the '90s. Her father made a device that attached to her wheelchair, like a Pez dispenser, and she could just touch it with her forearm and it would have a piece of kibble that would come out. So there are a lot of gadgets, a lot created by the community that would end up using them that can help with things like with treat delivery.

Mindy Henderson: Okay, okay. That's all very innovative. I like it. Is anything coming to mind that's maybe the most unusual or unique thing that you've trained a dog to do for someone?

Sheri Soltes: One gentleman who was a veteran, he'd been hurt in a helicopter accident when he was a medic in Vietnam. He wanted the dog to pull Velcro on his tennis shoes, which nobody has asked for before or since. The Velcro was an interesting one. Pulling the woman's zipper down was one that we hadn't done. I always say we can train them to open a refrigerator and fetch a non-alcoholic beverage.

Ray McCoy was a pastor. Well, he still is. He has a rare condition called Von Hippel syndrome where there's tumors on the spinal cord, and if you bend a certain way, it hits the nerve and he would just pass out. So that was an odd condition, but then the dog will go get help. So that came in very handy for him, but we haven't seen... It's a rare condition. We have another gentleman who's now a board member. They still don't know what it is, but every six weeks he just gets episodes where his vision blurs, he has nausea, he gets dizzy, and he just has to lay down.

And his dog will bring him a bucket if he's going to be sick, or a bottle of water or a portable oxygen thing that you squeeze that pumps oxygen into your face. So it's still retrieval, but the dog is being cued by him having a seizure. Now, the dog's gotten to where he knows a seizure is going to happen a couple of hours ahead of time. So if the client is at church with his kids, he can leave and drive home so he can beat the seizure and be in a safe place when it happens.

So sometimes the dogs will surprise you with what they figure out or start doing on their own. We've had deaf clients that we train a hearing dog to alert for a certain set of sounds, and they'll start alerting the additional sounds because they figure out the person can't hear. One lady, we trained her dog to alert her to the tea kettle whistle, and it started alerting her to just the sound of boiling water. So when her soup bubbled, it would let her know.

We had a dog that woke her deaf partner up in the middle of the night and she didn't know what it was, and she kept looking around. It turned out the picture behind her bed had fallen down, and that's what the dog was alerting her to. So it's pretty interesting what you'll discover as you continue with you and the dog.

Mindy Henderson: That's so interesting.

Sheri Soltes: And besides all the technical things, they're a wonderful supportive friend to have as well. So I call them technology you can hug.

Mindy Henderson: Yeah. I feel like any of them, regardless of their classification and what kind of helping animal they are, I feel like they all fall into the bucket of emotional support animals. Would you agree with that just because of the nature of-

Sheri Soltes: Well, they help you. An emotional support animal has been a fraught with controversy category.

Mindy Henderson: Oh. Oh, interesting. Okay.

Sheri Soltes: So I'm not going to use that term. That, by definition, is any species does not have to have training. It's basically covered by the Fair Housing Act, so people could have different... But that's where you've got all the unruly animals on airplanes and stuff like that and whatever. So yes, animals are great friends, but I won't use that term because it's super distinctive from we're at the top echelon of training and that's a different thing.

But yeah, the emotional benefit of having some kind of working dog as your partner is huge. And you were talking about muscle weakness. We've had people with fibromyalgia that went into remission because you're brushing a dog, you're petting the dog, sometimes you're taking little walks with the dog, even if it's just in your house, and you'll regain a lot of muscle strength doing those things.

Mindy Henderson: Wow.

Sheri Soltes: And the pain can recede too.

Mindy Henderson: That's amazing. That's absolutely, absolutely spectacular. What would you encourage a person to think about if they're considering a service dog and trying to decide if it's the right way to go for them?

Sheri Soltes: I would say carefully research the providers and apply to more than one to give yourself more choices. I don't want anybody to go get a dog where they use any kind of punishment training. And the terms that you see used are corrections, which means punishment or balanced training, which means sometimes they get a treat, sometimes we punish them. So none of that.

If you look at their website and you see metal collars on the dogs, whether it's a choke chain or a pinch collar, which has all spikes or anything that looks like a shock collar, which is usually an orange or wide black collar with a square box on it, and you'll see the person may be wearing a lanyard with a little... looks like a teeny remote control. That's a shock collar. So none of that. We don't want that. Then how much individual time do you get training, personalized training?

Accredited by Assistance Dogs International is good. That's why you go to their website. They're not all the same, but at least they tried that much, like the good housekeeping seal of approval. Are they asking you to raise money? Are they treating you with respect? Let's go the positive way. Are they treating you with respect? Not infantilizing you, not being parental, not being super, "I'm telling you how it's going to be," that kind of thing? So do you feel comfortable with them? That sort of thing.

Those are some of the aspects of evaluating the provider because they are not all the same. And when I started, I had to learn that too when I was looking to hire staff. If anyone could make a dog sit, I was impressed and now I know what to look for. And you can tell from the dog's body language. Are their muscles relaxed? Or is their tail wagging? Or are they rigid?

If you're thinking about it, it's like having a small child where it's a lot more responsibility for you, whether you're physically doing everything or your support group is. Things take longer; you will attract more attention in public. These days, people are challenged less, but you're still going to get people that want to talk to you and you have to become comfortable with saying, "This isn't a good time," or listening to them.

They're going to want to tell you about their dog, "I have a dog just like that, only different." And then they'll just start telling you about their dog. If you're challenged, we prepare our clients with the law and all that. But no, the challenges have really died down over nearly 40 years. Although the fake service dogs are a little bit of an issue, but so far so good.

That's part of our orientation is, "Here are some things to consider. You're going to have dog hair, you're going to have to take the dog out to toilet no matter what the weather is, several times a day. Stuff's going to take longer. You have to pack all their baby bag stuff," things like that.

In summer, in Texas, you have to be mindful of, "Don't have them on the dark pavement because it can burn their paws. So trying to keep them on the grass or on the white sidewalk," stuff like that. It's like having a little kid with you. But it's fun too. It's a big old icebreaker. People will start talking to you. They'll forget about whatever makes you different and they'll just start talking to you about the dog. So it's very nice way of making new friends also.

Mindy Henderson: Very true, very true. Which actually brings another question to mind. Do you provide dogs for children and adults? Just adults? Are there age limits?

Sheri Soltes: We do only adults because in the early days when we did younger people, the parents end up taking care of the dog and then the dog bonds with the parents. So we want the client to be responsible for advocating for the dog. We've had parents with adult children that they want to give the dog back because, "Oh, we have a Persian carpet. We didn't realize there would be fur."

And even an adult comes with parents, we're noticing if the parents are answering all the questions for the applicant, or a spouse is doing all the talking, whether they're doing all the talking and pushing them into it or they're not really for it, we're trying to be cognizant of that also. Because we want the client to be the one taking responsibility for the dog, we're just doing adults. We've even shied away from college students because they have so much else going on, this tends to be too much.

Mindy Henderson: Okay, good to know. Good to know. There are probably too many to count, I would guess, but do you have a favorite moment or a favorite story from doing this work?

Sheri Soltes: Well, the favorite moment is anytime you are driving home with a dog you just got out of a shelter, you're driving and you're looking at the back seat at the dog and you're like, "You're going to be safe and loved from now on." And the dog kind of knows it, and they finally relax, and that's elation every single time.

Mindy Henderson: I love that.

Sheri Soltes: Another favorite time is when we match the client with the dog, we will introduce a client to maybe three or four dogs and then talk with them about their preferences. And every client thinks they have the most beautiful, smartest dog, and they do.

Mindy Henderson: Right. Well, I know I do.

Sheri Soltes: Right. And so those are wonderful moments now. And now because of cell phones and stuff, every day the trainers are sending videos of training sessions, and when you see a dog that came in that was thin with its ribs showing, it had a dusty coat, and now it's glowing and it gets its vest and it starts doing things like tugging the door open or walking down the aisle at Home Depot real proud and real focused on a trainer, it's very moving every time.

It's all those little things. We've had dogs save people's lives, but the everyday things they do are just as wonderful. And like this story with Diane and Jaguar that's in our current e-news, she's now walking where before she was really dependent on a wheelchair. So seeing her excitement is very elating, exhilarating as well.

Mindy Henderson: Makes me so happy. And I feel like too, just thinking back to Jenny, they get these expressions on their faces when they're helping you, and I swear they're proud of themselves. They know that they've done good.

Sheri Soltes: Yeah. And the way that we train is basically, you are the most interesting thing in the room. So the reason the dog is focused on you and not on the hamburger wrapper on the floor, wherever you are, is because you won the personality contest. So you're not punishing it for ignoring you. You're Las Vegas and Santa Claus and Miss America all rolled into one.

So you are that dog's favorite thing, and it's giving you its attention because something good's always going to happen. And sometimes our clients, especially folks that were born with different challenges, they've only been on the receiving end of people taking care of them and all of that, and it's very nice. And also, our clients who maybe had an accident or something happened later, they're responsible for that dog and they find it a positive that someone's depending on them too. And that's nice.

Mindy Henderson: That's really great. Well, I could talk to you all day, period, but especially about dogs. I'm really grateful to you for joining me. Is there anything that you would want to leave people with or any final thoughts on the world of service dogs?

Sheri Soltes: Well, we're happy to answer people's questions. I know you're going to provide all of our contact information. We'd love to see you at the dog walk in your Renaissance or Medieval finery. And if you feel enthusiastic and you're having positive feelings because of our chat together, you and your audience, that's all I want, just to connect with more people and share our story and maybe be a part of your story too.

Mindy Henderson: Well, thank you. That's very well said, and a perfect note to leave things on. Thank you so much, Sheri.

Sheri Soltes: Thank you also.

Mindy Henderson:

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