

A Dog's Tale



*Many people have asked me about Sophia, or "Sophie" as I usually just call her. Well, this is **Sophie's** story! This is the short story to a longer "tale." 😊*

My family and I decide that it might be a good idea for me to apply for a service or "helper" dog that would be able to help me with daily tasks, possibly pulling my manual wheelchair, or picking things up for me, or just as a companion who could stay with me during the day. So, I apply for a helper dog with several programs that train them for disabled people ([Susquehanna Service Dogs](#), [Canine Companions for Independence](#), [Paws with a Cause](#), [Canine Partners For Life](#) & [Independence Dogs, Inc.](#)), but events do not work out with the helper dog I am matched with (a [Great Dane](#)) and after six months of waiting the next application process will likely take one to three years! The helper dog I originally matched with was named "Hope." Hope wasn't a bad dog, and she did eventually match with another person one year later, but she was not yet fully trained to do all the things a helper dog needs to be able to do. Hope was being trained to help me walk, although by that time, I was having considerably more trouble walking than

when I applied. Also, Hope had several accidents in the small room I was staying in while we finished our three weeks of training. Unfortunately, even with me returning a second time to the helper dog compound trying to make "Hope" the helper dog I had matched with workout, she didn't pass the test. You can imagine how difficult it was for me to give up a dog named "Hope." It was like giving up "Hope" for goodness sake!

So, I returned home and thought about reapplying. Of course, I did not want to wait another six months to three years for another dog to be trained. So, I decided that maybe my family and I could get a puppy and do the training ourselves. We learn about training dogs and all about different dog breeds. We were all impressed with the information provided on the [Dog Breed Information](#) website. One weekend, my parents and I and a close friend all go to see about twenty puppies--one litter of [German Shepherds](#) and one litter of [Golden Retrievers](#) which are being sold through the newspaper. We test them all for trainability and personality using a [puppy test](#) recommended by the [Monks of New Skete](#). The first puppy we test is **Sophie**.

Sophie scores higher than all seven of her brothers, and is the only female in the litter. So, we consider it a good sign, but I say that we cannot just take the first puppy we test! So, we also test the Golden retriever puppies. Several score well too. Ultimately, we decide that because I have started swimming as a therapy, and because a Golden Retriever will likely enjoy the water too much (and may decide



to join me in the pool), that a German Shepherd is the better choice. We are all a little hesitant about trying to train a German Shepherd Dog since they grow-up to be rather big and scary looking dogs. A Golden Retriever might be easier we think, but deep down inside I want **Sophie** (the smallest puppy & only female in her litter). So, we purchase **Sophie!** 😊

My friend Christine names her "**Sophia**" and hopes that the puppy will be easy to train and may teach us both about wisdom. **Sophia** comes from latin & means "wisdom." Days later I realize that **Sophie's** birthday is August 24th 2000. A wonderfully strange coincidence! Christine's birthday is December 24th (Christmas Eve) and mine is April 24th; in terms of one

calendar year we are all exactly four months apart. We laugh and consider it another good sign. Strange too, August 24th is the birthday of my father's best friend who died of cancer several years before, but whose personality and positive spirit always made me smile. When I was growing-up, Gene would take me to see horror movies that no one else wanted to sit through. As a kid, Gene had a female German Shepherd named "Greta," another good sign.

*Unfortunately, signs do not remain optimistic. My MS starts giving me more problems, and our apartment complex informs us that we are in violation of the rules. No dogs aloud! Especially not puppies! But, **Sophie** is being trained as a [service dog](#) so they have to make an exception. We are informed that we are allowed to keep **Sophie**.*

*Raising a puppy on the seventh floor of an apartment complex in Philadelphia confined to a wheelchair is very difficult. **Sophie** has accidents everywhere! I tell my roommate that I cannot deal with the mess any longer, and that I am going to get rid of the puppy. My roommate says that I can do whatever I want, but says that the puppy **loves me**, and hands me a stack of books to read about training dogs. Puts the leash in my hand, and leaves me alone. I ignore MY ROOMMATE. I make up signs to get rid of **Sophie**.*

***Guess what?** The puppy's charm speaks louder than my roommate. I cannot do it. 😊 The puppy is much too cute. I start reading the books. Shortly after, my best friend from graduate school visits us and comes up with a plan to make a giant sand box "**poop deck**" on our balcony in view of the Philadelphia skyline--which **Sophie** might use as a bathroom. Our neighbors are delighted. Well, half of them are! But, as time passes we win almost everyone's heart and more vocal supporters in our complex than I can count. Yes, it is difficult. Carrying forty pound bags of sand from the parking lot up the elevator seven floors to our apartment every other week--on a scooter even with my roommate and family helping me from time to time is exhausting, but we mange and our method works! **Sophie** who is still only a puppy does not yet have strong bladder and bowel control and cannot wait long enough to make it down our apartment elevator (seven floors) without going to the bathroom on the way. When accidents happen, **Sophie** looks and feels bad, and she learns to use the sandbox "poop deck" quickly. **Sophie** still has the*



*occasional accident in our apartment, but not often and she grows quickly. Our sandbox "poop deck" with the Philadelphia skyline is a complete success! Much improved over the loose newspapers we were originally spreading on our porch to catch **Sophie's** droppings. Philadelphia is a very windy city seven stories up!*



*The time goes by quickly, **Sophie** cheers everyone up! I make friends everywhere we go. People see a guy in a scooter/wheelchair with a German Shepherd puppy and they smile. They want to talk to me. Before long, **Sophie** and I have about*

*a dozen new friends-- dogs and their owners meeting us everyday outside after work in Philadelphia. While our dogs play together, the dog owners eventually start telling me about their problems. Most seem small compared to mine, and most of them don't know or ask what my problem is, so I usually don't tell them and just give them my best advice. I love watching **Sophie** grow up and play with the other dogs. Our story gets more complex after that--with us moving to Levittown Pennsylvania and then Pittsburgh, but God works a small miracle through **Sophie** everywhere we go!*

*Since moving to Allentown, PA **Sophie** has become involved with our community. She travels many days of the week with me to Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Hospital where she is well received by the many patients there, but especially by the MS Wellness group. **Sophia** is a member of our Broken Art Creativity Class at Good Shepherd and has actually helped me make paintings as an artist. There was a day when **Sophia** jumped over a wet painting I was creating and dragged the recently cut grass clippings across the canvas! I stopped painting, but then took a second look and liked her contribution. **Sophia's** painting called "Moment" became one of my most popular, even before people knew the story.*

***Sophia** has other responsibilities too. Besides just helping me create artwork, she has to sit patiently and wait while I attend my different swimming, exercise and rehabilitation classes. She has to sit and behave when we go to my doctor and dentist appointments. When we go out to eat at*

a restaurant, **Sophia** has to be on her best behavior and cannot beg for table scraps, although she does have one restaurant in town that always makes her a special dish call “**Sophia’s Surprise**” because it is always whatever the cook has leftover on any given day.

While we were able to attend practice regularly, **Sophia** was a member of St. Catharine’s Contemporary Choir, but instead of howling, **Sophia** had to remain quietly while the other members sang. This never prevented her from standing up after a performance to acknowledge her audience clapping for her good manners, however. **Sophie** attends Mass with us too, and must sit especially quiet as she knows she is in a very special place. She often stays after Mass for the rosary, and I believe may be the only dog in town who goes to Confession (with me, of course!).

Every day **Sophie** goes for walks with me and my family. She meets many interesting people who say “hi.” I often don’t even know all the people who know my dog, and usually have to ask her “Who was that, **Sophie**?”. She enjoys going to College every day as we often walk through Muhlenberg College where she likes to chase bunnies and squirrels. Sophie is very obedient on our walks. If I tell her she can’t chase a bunny or squirrel, she listens.

Sophia is a very intelligent dog and we often have to spell out words that are her favorite things. **Sophia** is also bilingual as she knows both German and English commands.

Sophia has been to the theater, music concerts, the movies, and even sporting events, but did not much like ice hockey as it was very loud indoors at the “Igloo” when the Pittsburgh Penguins scored their goals. As **Sophia** might tell you, she could never be sure when that was going to happen! **Sophie** found it difficult to just relax and enjoy herself at hockey games.

The other place **Sophia** found exhausting was the monkey house at the zoo. The squirrel monkeys especially just loved her to pieces, but **Sophia** was very happy to get away from their monkey business and teasing. **Sophia** enjoyed all the other exhibits at the zoo, but was a little leery about the big cats and elephants. I am not sure she knew that the giraffe was actually alive as it was very tall and it did not move much. Still, after smelling the air and all the animals for a good longtime, **Sophia’s** day at the zoo was a complete success. She is an amazing helper dog!

*So, all of these things **Sophia** does for me; some of them are hard and serious work, while others are more relaxing and fun, like just being my best friend. As you can imagine, **Sophie's** tale is much longer than this short story, but, that I will save for another day. I hope you had fun, and learned a lot about helper dogs today! We will see you again sometime soon. God bless.*

Your friends,

BRETT
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Brett & Sophia