



# How I Trained My Service Dog by Judith A. Brecka



**Mikey** aka Daydream Talk Dirty To Me, U.D., R.E. AXJ and AX is one of the few Staffords working as a service dog and medical alert dog. When I met Mikey at age 11 months, I spent time at a busy dog show seeing how he reacted to people and other dogs. Mikey has the sort of temperament that is necessary in a service dog ie. he is not aggressive to other dogs, animals and people. Since service dogs perform many of their duties in public, it is essential that they have good attention but that they can be taken anywhere including places where there are other dogs and animals.

We first started with some basic obedience and then went to work with a competitive obedience trainer for the absolute attention that is require for him as a service dog and obedience competition dog. I have a friend who has worked for Guide Dogs for almost 20 years and when she met Mikey at an obedience competition in Sacramento, CA a couple of years ago, she absolutely loved him and his steady temperament. I do call on her for ideas on how to train certain skills and I will keep training Mikey until I am no longer able to do so.

Even in AKC obedience competitions the AKC rules allow handlers who suffer some sort of disability to use some aids and to place the dumbbell on the retrieve on the flat and retrieve over the high jump instead of throwing it. Since my

arthritis causes swelling in my wrist joint, and fingers throwing the dumbbell was painful and sometimes I would cry out. The first time I placed the dumbbell in Open B was a Pasanita Obedience Club's trials in 2012 as I found that even gripping the steering wheel was painful that morning. My trainer told me about the placement but suggested we try to do that at least once before going into the ring. She was skeptical that Mikey would do it without further training. However, Mikey proved her wrong and was so concerned about working for me he ended getting 2nd place with a 198 in a very competitive class. Since the arthritis has attacked many other joints Mikey seems to know which joints are hurting and also tries to provide some TLC.

Some of the ways Mikey helps me is by picking up a jacket or sweater if I drop it and retrieving for me. He uses his strong and steady back to help me up if I fall down. He also retrieves other objects for me if needed.

Since I also have some loss of peripheral vision due to a detached retina in 2009, Mikey sees what I may not see on my left side. Particularly important since skateboarders have sometimes almost hit me on the left side from behind since I cannot see how close they are coming. Mikey gets me out of the way. Of course, what the skateboarder is doing by riding on the sidewalk is illegal but I prefer to not be injured.



# How I Trained My Service Dog

by Judith A. Brecka

CONTINUED

Mikey is quite popular with waiters and theater staff. I always try to sit in an outdoor patio if possible in a location away from people to avoid Mikey getting stepped on by a staff person. Mikey will put his paws up on the counter at the movie theater with the ticket in his mouth. So far he has not swallowed one. At one theater the staff person went to the refreshment counter and got Mikey a dish of ice so that he would have some water during the movie. There is special seating for disabled people and I usually sit on an easy chair or settee when watching a movie with friends.

I am very aware of the fact that many people think he is a "pitbull" and may be afraid of him so we always walk slowly and steady. I do insist that if Mikey is wearing his service vest, people MUST ask permission before petting him. Mikey does LOVE children and often on our walks to lunch, theater or shopping, we will take the time to talk to children and show the parents the proper way to pet him. Because of his public stature as a service dog, Mikey has to be an ambassador for the breed and even if I am not feeling well or in a hurry, we do try to accommodate people with questions or those who might want to pet him.

Mikey also serves as my medical alert dog as sometimes an asthma attack sneaks up on me and Mikey alerts me by hitting my knee with his big head and whining. I then immediately use my rescue inhaler or use my nebulizer machine to give my lungs a better treatment. I did not teach him this skill but I do reward him each time he alerts me.

Mikey will accompany me on his first plane ride to St Louis, Mo for the SBTCA nationals. We have our seat assignment and I have spoken several times with American Airlines special relations person for those who may need special assistance in getting on the plane and deplaning. I will probably be the nervous one as I have not flown since October, 2009.

I would like to mention that Mikey has provided some grief therapy for three of my clients. The first one lost his 18 year old son unexpectedly as his son died in the night of a heart attack. The day the father came to see me he was having difficulty in

speaking to me about it so that I could try to see what legal issues may have to be to be dealt with. Mikey went over to him very quietly and placed his head on his knee. Since my client did not want me to see him cry, he kept his head down and was petting Mikey on his head. I thought Mikey was bothering him until client advised that he would like Mikey to stay right there.

Two other clients had received word from their doctors that they had a month or a few weeks to live due to cancer. Both of them came to my office individually and told me that they just wanted to hug Mikey. Mikey was happy to assist them. I left my office for a few minutes so that the each woman could have some privacy dealing with her emotions and compose herself before leaving.

