



Saxon the Stafford Service Dog in Training by Christina Jacobs

My name is Christina and I live and work in Maine with my boyfriend, two cats and my Service Dog in Training, Saxon. Saxon is a Staffordshire Bull Terrier who I adopted two years ago when I was going through a rough time after my grandfather passed away. Saxon's first family could no longer care for him because he proved to be too high energy for their three young children. He was 5 months old, about 20 pounds and absolutely insane! He chewed up all sorts of things that he shouldn't have, he chased the cats around the apartment and he even had a few accidents in the house.



Five month old Saxon

With some training and LOTS of patience, though, he eventually became a beloved family member that we couldn't imagine not having him.

Then, late last summer (2012), I was finally diagnosed with Anxiety (with compulsions) and Panic Disorder (Panic Attacks), which I had suffered with my entire life, but never had a proper diagnosis. Shortly after, a friend suggested a Service Dog (SD). It was something I'd never thought of for myself. I knew that SDs could help people with a variety of disabilities, both physical and mental, but I'd never thought of myself as disabled. So, I did my research and discovered that I would qualify under the Americans with Disabilities Act and I could probably benefit from the use of a SD. I talked to my psychologist about it and she agreed that it was something I should pursue.



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I also learned that one option is for a disabled individual to train his or her own SD, if, for whatever reason, they decide a program dog is not right for them. Most people are aware of SD programs, but few are aware that individuals with disabilities may also train their own SD. This is what I decided to do. There are many reasons that I decided to owner train: I thought it would be beneficial to me to be more involved in the training process than most programs allow, I had a difficult time finding a program that trained dogs for mental illness that wasn't caused by military service and I didn't want the typical Labrador or German Shepherd as my SD, I wanted a Stafford, and not just any Stafford, I wanted Saxon.



Saxon was a little less than two at the time and, while he was well trained, he needed a lot more training before he could even be considered a SD candidate. I made a few mistakes in

the beginning: I brought him out into public too early, I began public access training before task training, and I didn't use enough reinforcement when training tasks. Luckily, though, none of my mistakes were too damaging and Saxon is doing amazingly well with his training.



In fact, he recently passed the AKC's Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test! He still has a lot of training to go before he will be ready to work as my SD, but he is amazingly attentive and eager to please.

In order for a dog to be a SD, he has to do more than just provide comfort for his disabled handler. He has to perform specific tasks that help mitigate the handler's disability. Saxon's main tasks will be distracting/redirecting me during a panic attack, leading me to an exit or other safe space when I am feeling overwhelmed or having a severe panic attack, and interrupting my compulsions. We will most certainly be adding more tasks as time goes on! He will also be trained to retrieve dropped items as I sometimes have difficulty doing so myself as a result of joint pain. Because the pain is not severe enough to be considered disabling, this does not count as a task to mitigate a disability, but is a bonus. In addition to all of that he provides great comfort to me and I have fewer panic attacks when he is around, but that is not a task, it is just a wonderful and comforting bonus.

While owner training is a perfectly valid and legal way to train a SD, it's also a very difficult thing to do, especially without support. I was a member of a few online communities, which definitely helped, but it can be nice to have the backing of a program to help you if you run into any issues.





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Thankfully, a few months ago, I met a local SD partner who told me about a program called Possibility Dogs Inc. (<http://possibilitydogs.org/>) that trains rescue dogs with proper temperaments to be SDs for people with mental disabilities. I contacted the group and, because I adopted Saxon, they welcomed us to the program and offered to help us in any way they can! They will assist us with any fundraising we may need for training or equipment, will provide us with a program ID and patches for his vests and harnesses (which are not required by the ADA, but help prevent access issues), and will document and administer a test called Public Access Test (PAT) later this year. A PAT is not required for a dog to be a SD, but it is a good test to take to ensure that the dog can effectively do his job in public without being distracted by what is going on around him, because there will be a lot of distractions!

Many people are unaware that you should not pet or try to distract a SD while the dog is working. When public access training with Saxon, I have had people run up and pet him, make kiss sounds to get his attention, squeal about how cute he is, take our picture without asking and we even encountered someone working in the mall who chased us with a



remote controlled toy car! These were all great training opportunities for Saxon and me, but inappropriate ways to act around a SD. While I am not likely to be hurt if Saxon isn't focused on me for a minute or two, there are some SD handlers who can be injured or become ill if their SD is distracted from working. This is why it is so important for people to understand that SDs are working and should not be distracted from their job. This comical Public Service Announcement from the Norwegian Association of the Blind does a great job of showing many of common ways that people distract SD's.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nf6-i5C0Bwg&>) Instead of distracting the dog from working, talk to the handler (not to the dog) to ensure that it is ok to pet the dog and don't be offended if the handler says that you can't. I will often let people pet Saxon while he is in training if they ask nicely and it is an appropriate time to do so.

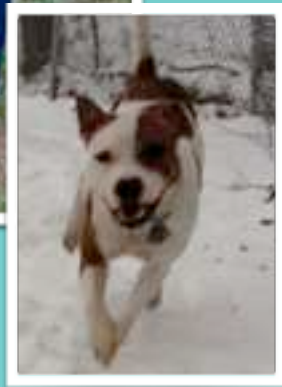
Another thing that some people are unaware of, is that Service Dogs get time off! Saxon is not on duty 24/7 and he gets a lot of time off to play and cuddle and be a dog. Here are a few pictures of him enjoying his time off!

I am so thankful that that Saxon came into my life when he did and I am so thankful to all of the people who have supported me throughout this journey. In my experience with the breed and with Saxon specifically, I have come to the conclusion that Staffordshire Bull Terriers can make great Service Dogs or Therapy Dogs (well trained and friendly pets that visit patients in hospitals, hospice, nursing homes, etc.) if the individual dog has the proper temperament. I hate to even think about it, but when it is time to retire Saxon and begin training his successor, I hope to train another Stafford.





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When choosing an adult Stafford as a candidate for Service Dog work, you want to make sure the dog has the proper temperament. What I would look for would be a dog with no (or very low) prey drive and dog reactivity, who is not fearful of loud noises or crowds, is eager to please, is food motivated (helps with training!), and is alert. If possible, you should have someone experienced in training Service Dogs evaluate the candidate, as well.

When choosing a Stafford puppy as a candidate for Service, you definitely want to have a relationship with a few breeders and really know how their puppies are as adults. Obviously make sure the parents are health tested and free of common genetic issues. You'll want to meet the parents and some dogs from past litters. Don't put all your eggs in one

basket, it may take a couple of litters/ breeders before you find the right puppy. Then, talk with the breeder(s). Tell the breeder(s) the traits you are looking for and the work you plan to do with the dog. Ask the breeder(s) to choose a puppy from the litter that s/he believes will grow up to have the traits you are looking for. The breeder will best know how her/his puppies grow up and should be able to tell you better than any test which puppy will be best suited for work. If you can, it would also be helpful to have someone experienced in training Service Dogs evaluate the litter(s) you are interested and see if s/he agrees with the breeder(s)' assessment. Always have a back up plan in place in case the puppy turns out not to be a good candidate or needs to be retired early as a result of unforeseen temperament or health problems.

To see more of Saxon follow him on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/saxonthestafford>