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Ellie in the children's interview room

BY REBECCA WALLICK

# Comfort IN THE Court

DOGS PROVIDE A SAFE HARBOR  
WHEN LEGAL SEAS GET ROUGH



**It's everyone's nightmare:** You're the victim of a serious crime. Your world collapses—you're frightened, stunned, physically injured and completely overwhelmed. Police and prosecutors interview you about the smallest details, forcing you to relive the experience over and over. Eventually, you'll have to face the perpetrator in court, testifying and once again reviving the horror. Emotionally paralyzed, you don't know if you can do it.

Now imagine the same situation, but this time, a special dog rests at your feet during every interview, sits with you outside the courtroom as you wait to testify—perhaps even goes up to the witness stand with you—and stands beside you at sentencing when you give the court your victim-impact statement. This four-legged victim/witness advocate—accompanied by his human counterpart from the victim advocate's office—helps you remain calm and reduces what can be a traumatic part of the legal process. You

stroke his soft fur, gaze into his warm brown eyes and feel the reassuring weight of his head resting on your foot. He's there for you, giving you exactly what you need at that moment: strength to get through this part of the nightmare.

This is not a totally speculative scenario. In Washington's King and Snohomish counties, two innovative prosecuting attorney's offices have begun using highly trained service dogs to help victims of crime, and the dogs are having a positive impact. Not only do they assist victims,

they also boost morale for the prosecutors and victim advocates who deal with the often-horrible consequences of crime on a daily basis.

## Synchronicity

It all started with Ellen O'Neill-Stephens' flash of insight. Stephens, a King County deputy prosecuting attorney working in Seattle, has an adult son, Sean, who has cerebral palsy and is severely disabled. In 2003, Stephens and Sean went to Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) of Santa Rosa, Calif., for a service dog and were matched with Jeeter, a big yellow Golden Retriever/Lab mix. Jeeter made it easier for people to approach Sean, and Sean was able to "give back" by sharing Jeeter with others. While she and Sean were undergoing training at CCI, Stephens noticed that other participants were getting "facility" dogs, dogs trained to assist caregivers in various types of institutions. One was slated for a neonatal ICU, others for a spinal cord injury unit and a veteran's hospital; dogs were also being placed with children with autism.

Upon returning to Seattle and her office, Stephens began thinking creatively, won-

dering if service dogs might assist in the legal setting. On days that Jeeter could not accompany Sean, Stephens took the dog to work with her. She was the Drug Court prosecutor, and thought Jeeter might help kids with their recovery. She was right—the children quickly adopted Jeeter as their mascot. “One day in my office lobby, a boy, sexually abused by his mother and who [had] sexually abused his sister, glommed onto Jeeter. I didn’t know this at the time, but the prosecutor was offering a deal to get him to testify against his mother, and the boy was backing out. The boy asked to play with Jeeter. I asked him, ‘Would it be easier to talk if Jeeter was with you?’ He said yes, so the plea discussion was rescheduled. At the next meeting, I said, ‘Everyone on the floor!’ so the boy could sit and hug Jeeter. Defense counsel, prosecutor, cop—everyone sat on the floor. It worked. He told them everything that had happened.”

This was an “Aha!” moment for Stephens: The King County prosecutor’s office should have its own facility dog to work with victims. She started with her office’s sexual assault unit. No response. She pushed. Some were receptive, others, not so much. Things stalled. Finally, Stephens arranged for King County Prosecutor

Norm Maleng and members of the sexual assault unit to meet Jeeter. “Jeeter convinced them,” Stephens recalls with a laugh.

As Maleng recalls, “When Ellen came up with the concept of using Jeeter with victims, without hesitation I said yes. I had an intuitive feel for what it could do; I understood from my heart what the program was all about, having grown up on a dairy farm with Collies who were an integral part of our family, offering companionship and unconditional love in sad or hurtful times.” Maleng marvels that—decades later—dogs are becoming a part of the justice system. “I center on their healing power within the justice system. There is so much hurt—the victims, families, even members of our office—from exposure to trauma and anxiety. So within this environment, the dogs contribute to justice.”

#### Enter Ellie

Worried that using Jeeter part-time at the prosecutor’s office was taking him away from Sean, Stephens convinced a co-worker, Deputy Prosecutor Page Ulrey, to apply to CCI for a dog. “I wanted a dog,” Ulrey recalls, but she was concerned that gaining access to offices and courtrooms would be a problem. Stephens,



Jeeter and Ashley at work

## They All Look Great To Me



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however, wasn't easily dissuaded, and continued to encourage Ulrey to look into the program. In the meantime, Jeeter spent one day a week helping with child victim interviews.

Eventually, Ulrey began the CCI application process, which starts with a written essay describing the need for a dog. When she was turned down because CCI was concerned that their highly trained dog would be underutilized, Ulrey was ready to give up, but Stephens wouldn't let her. Together, they attended a CCI dinner in Seattle and performed some magic on a CCI staff member who had once worked in a shelter for victims of domestic violence. Ulrey reapplied and was accepted. In December 2004, she went to CCI's Santa Rosa facility for training and to be matched with a dog.

Ulrey's training group consisted of five people and five dogs. The first three days, each participant was asked to work with each dog for a half day; they were assisted and observed by CCI staff. "I got Brielle—I call her Ellie—on the second day. She was a nightmare! She was stubborn. She wouldn't listen to me. I felt horrible. I was in tears by the end of the afternoon. At the end of the third day, we were asked to rank in order the dogs we wanted. I wrote: *Any dog but Ellie*," Ulrey recalls. The next day, they brought the dogs out, one at a time, and matched them to people. "Ellie was last, and she got me. By the end of that day, I'd fallen in love with her. She's a sturdy character, where the others were more eager to please. She's calm and self-possessed, which is perfect for the criminal justice system."

Ellie was placed into service immediately, and was an instant hit. "She's a real morale booster for everyone in the office," says Ulrey. "It's a high-stress environment, with gut-wrenching trials involving victims of violence, sexually abused children, aggressive defense counsel, lives at stake. Even the security guards at the entrance to the courthouse enjoy her." Ellie is believed to be the first service dog in the nation to be officially placed in a prosecuting attorney's office.

Ellie works three days a week. Currently, Ulrey is in charge of the King County

prosecutor's juvenile court unit, where Ellie visits kids in detention or in court. Both Ellie and Jeeter also help with victim interviews in the main office. When she's not working, Ellie's life is much like that of any well-loved and pampered dog: one day a week in doggy day care, lots of off-leash park time, runs and walks with Ulrey. Ulrey can't think of any negative aspects to Ellie's training, demeanor or work (with the exception of an occasional embarrassing episode of diarrhea

either Jeeter or Ellie in her work. "As a child interview specialist, conducting forensic interviews regarding sexual assault, kidnapping, attempted murder," says Ashley, "my job consists of taking an objective statement from a child. This involves not giving any feedback, support, nurturing or therapeutic intervention. When things get emotional, the only response I am able to give to a child is to offer a tissue or a break. The dogs provide a loving, unconditionally supportive environment for the

**Canine Companions for Independence** (CCI) is a nonprofit organization that enhances the lives of people with disabilities by providing highly trained assistance dogs and ongoing support to ensure quality partnerships. See their website for regional and satellite office locations.

[caninecompanions.org](http://caninecompanions.org)



at the courthouse). She never growls, is completely reliable with people and other dogs, and is a wonderful companion.

Stephens' desire to see victims helped by these dogs didn't end with the success of Ulrey and Ellie. One of Stephens' friends happens to be Janis Ellis, prosecuting attorney for Snohomish County, King County's northern neighbor. Stephens planted the bug, and before long, Heidi Potter, victims' advocate in the Snohomish County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, applied to CCI. In November 2006, Stilson, a handsome black Lab, became the second service dog to be placed in such a setting.

CCI continues to monitor the program. According to Jeanine Konopelski, CCI's national public relations manager, "This is a new venture for CCI and we are still evaluating to see if the specialized training and skills put into CCI facility dogs are a necessity for this type of work. Certainly, the work has proved to be valuable—there's no question about that."

### Helping Victims Cope

When it comes to young victims, dogs really shine. Ashley Wilske, child interview specialist in the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, frequently involves

children; [they] sense the change of emotion and the changing behaviors of the child [and] will move in and lay their head on the child's lap. The dogs make themselves available for continuous strokes, hugs and affection. Having a sobbing child hug a dog is more beneficial than any tool I could ever use."

The successful prosecution of a criminal case often depends on the ability of a victim to report and then testify regarding the details. With children—especially traumatized children—this can be extremely difficult. In just the few months that Stilson has been assisting victims in Snohomish County, Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Tobin Darrow has seen a significant positive impact. "I think Stilson [provides] a wonderful, warm reception. Initial victim interviews are often when a decision is made whether [or not] to start a case. We close a lot of cases when victims—children especially—can't or won't talk. Stilson allows the victim to start talking. It takes children time to develop trust with a prosecuting attorney, so Stilson is very helpful there. Or when kids have to wait—it's very hard on them, waiting for their turn to testify. Stilson is calming and reassuring."

Mark Roe, deputy prosecuting attorney



Ellie (left) and Jeeter in the courthouse hallway.

in Snohomish County's Special Assault Unit, agrees. In a recent case, an 11-year-old girl had to testify against her father, who had sexually abused her. Stilson comforted her while she waited in the hallway, and was in the back of the courtroom as visual reassurance as she testified. Mark, who admits that he wasn't a proponent of the service-dog idea in the beginning, now concedes that there are clear benefits, especially with children. He said that Stilson's calm and quiet demeanor is what convinced the judge in this particular trial to allow him inside the courtroom. "It's funny that Stilson's being profiled in a

magazine called Bark, because I've never heard him bark!" Mark added with a laugh.

Heidi Potter recalls a case in which Stilson accompanied her and Tobin to Harborview Medical Center's trauma unit to interview a shooting victim, who had been left paralyzed by his injuries. The man had been bound in duct tape, beaten with a baseball bat, shot in the neck and left for dead. When Stilson entered the hospital room, the man was delighted, and spent the next 10 minutes petting him from his bed. When Tobin asked him about being shot, the man began to talk, recalling how he had thought he was going to die; then, crying, he abruptly stopped speaking. Stilson, who had been lying on the floor, stood and put his head on the man's lap and stayed there until the man recovered enough to continue. Stilson then lay back down on the floor beside the bed. "I didn't give Stilson any command. He just did it," said Heidi.

Even if a victim doesn't have to testify at trial because the defendant pleads guilty, they may still have to face the defendant at sentencing. Preparing for—and anticipating—the sentencing can be highly stressful. Jessica Haight, 24, is a rape victim who spoke at the sentencing of her abuser in a recent Snohomish County

case. "I thought I was going to be a strong chick at sentencing," she said, "but I was fixated on the guy. I started crying. I did not understand why the victim advocate asked if I wanted Stilson in the courtroom with me. But they brought him in and he laid his head on my foot. I noticed I was playing with his ears. I'm pretty sure I rubbed a bald spot on his ear!"

As Jessica spoke by phone from the victim advocate's office for this interview, Stilson was lying on her foot. Jessica had "a million and one dogs" growing up, and has two now. Still, "I never would have thought of a therapy dog helping *me*. I saw guide dogs for the blind. But, me? I enjoyed [having] him in the courtroom. It was an extremely positive experience. It changed how I think about dogs, about therapy dogs. It should be a victim's right to have a therapy dog in the courtroom."

That thought is echoed by every prosecutor, victim/witness advocate, victim and legal system player who has seen these amazing dogs in action. Their use in prosecutor's offices—and particularly in courtrooms—is still in its infancy, yet the benefits are clear and the trend is growing. We can all hope that someday soon, service dogs in this setting will be the comforting norm. **B**

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