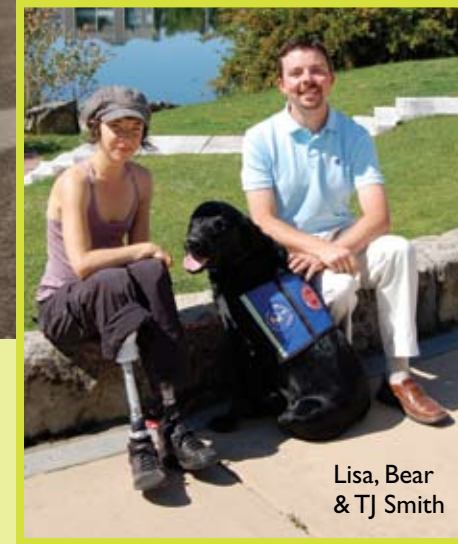


The LOVE of a GOOD Dog



The power of a dog's love to heal and help is so remarkable, it can be written as a medical prescription. Their companionship is something many people consider a privilege, but for others it is a necessity. ▶

By Erin Ryan • Photos by Laurie Pearman



Lisa, Bear & TJ Smith

Lisa Bufano understands that necessity... A double-amputee from the knees down without fingers on either hand, she needed a service dog to help her with the routines of day-to-day life. She was living in California at the time and discovered she would probably be on a waiting list for three years — the industry standard. But a phone call changed her life.

"We told her we could get started with a dog for her right away, and she moved to Boise just like that," said T.J. Smith, founder of Companion Training, a Boise-based business that has been training family dogs, therapy dogs and service dogs since 1998. In all of these categories, Smith provides people with animals that are "loyal, loving and highly skilled," the last element being especially important for clients such as Bufano.

Smith understands her situation better than most. Many years ago he was in a car accident that left him seriously injured, and he got a taste of what it would be like to live with a disability.

"I was very lucky that I could still walk," he said. "That experience was a big part of me wanting to train dogs for people with physical challenges."

Smith and Bufano made several trips to the Idaho Humane Society in search of the right dog. Along with size and intelligence, personality is one of the key characteristics in selecting a dog for assistance training, and a young black lab named Bear had it in spades. He was friendly and responsive, and he and Bufano connected.

Once the selection was made, Bear was enrolled in the Inmate Dog Alliance Project of Idaho (IDAPI), a community partnership of the Idaho Humane Society, Idaho Correctional Center and the Idaho State Correctional Institutions. The program places dogs from the Idaho Humane Society in correctional facilities for intensive socialization and obedience training by carefully screened inmates.

"We select dogs for the program that have socialization problems, fear and confidence related issues and dogs that we think have potential to be good companions but are not being adopted because of their lack of training and bad manners. Frequently people give up on these dogs too soon and they end up sitting in shelters waiting for just the right person to come along and give them a chance," said Idaho Humane Society Adoptions Director, Dee Fugit.

Inmates paired with IDAPI dogs care for, live with and train the animals using positive reinforcement techniques. More than 30 dogs are enrolled every eight weeks, increasing their chances of being adopted and saving room in the shelter for other animals. As for the inmates, Fugit said the program helps teach them responsibility, patience, tolerance, persistence, compassion and the feeling of giving back to the community.

Upon completing the program, many of the dogs become family pets. Those with exceptional aptitude can go on to become certified as service dogs with more intensive training. That was the story for Bear. Once he had learned the basics through IDAPI, he was ready for high-level skills training with Smith. This included bracing for stabilization, carrying cargo, retrieving objects and so on — things most people take for granted. As soon as he passed the public safety test, Bear was ready to be a part of Lisa Bufano's world. Smith said every time he watches individuals and their dogs come together it's a "miracle moment."

"Having a service dog changes people's lives," he said. "The companionship is huge. It's 24 hours a day, and you can take it with you anywhere you go."

In the words of writer and preservationist Roger Caras: "Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole." ■

