

# Brigadoon Partnership in the News!

## Lending a Helping Paw

-as written by Carol Hogan for The Horizon, Whatcom Community College Newspaper, February 2010

Do you know Ozzie Cooper –a stand-out at Whatcom Community College? Maybe you passed him in a crowded hallway walking with his best friend, Margaret Cooper, from class to class. Maybe you’ve noticed him during class, lying quietly under the desk, his long, wavy, gold hair complimented by a bright blue jacket with the words “Brigadoon” embroidered on the side.

He looks friendly, with what could be a sly smile as he winds his way single-mindedly through the hallway close by Cooper’s side. When he and Cooper approach the heavy double doors leading outside, like any gentleman with good manners, he reaches out and pushes the handicap button for her with his paw.

Did you say paw?



Yes. Because Ozzie is a 3-year-old golden retriever service dog who lives with Cooper, 24, and escorts her to school each day on the bus, napping under her desk while she’s in class. Sometimes he snores.

Cooper’s search for the perfect dog to match her needs wasn’t easy, and finding Ozzie took time.

“It takes about four years just to get a dog,” she said of the process that begins with an application packet requiring, among other things, reference letters and a doctor’s recommendation. Next a first visit is scheduled where the trainer introduces applicant and canine in an attempt to match the applicant’s needs with the dog’s ability.

“Each dog requires two years of nurturing and training before they can be placed with their human...you train them and they don’t graduate until they’re two years old,” Cooper said of Ozzie, who graduated last year from Brigadoon Youth and Service Dog Programs, in Bellingham, while Cooper is still working on her transfer degree, in quantum physics, from Whatcom.

But their training together is never ending. “It’s always a process to keep learning and growing with each other,” she said. “It’s a good, slow process.”

The Brigadoon Website says “it’s all about the right personality and the bond between...” applicant and dog.

“They [the trainers] see your needs, and then you go with the dogs out to train,” said Cooper, who needs Ozzie for her chronic pain caused by a neurovascular disorder. Ozzie guards her sensitive right side and when people get too close, such as in a crowded Whatcom hallway, she can ask him to hold his stance, either with quiet commands or by leash signals, allowing him to take the brunt of people bumping into her.

Sometimes she drops things because her hand “locks up.” Never fear, so far Ozzie has been able to pick up everything she’s dropped, including pencils, papers and boxes.

“He brings my shoes,” she said.

Before Ozzie, it was much harder for her. Often, just petting him can relieve the pain. “I can pat him and just relax,” she said.

The kind of dog she requires must have the ability to keep pace with her, and Ozzie is very good at leading. If Cooper changes pace, he must be willing to do exactly what she needs, without force.

“He’s pretty loving, so he’s willing, but it’s more of what he can do and how we work together,” she said. Ozzie has a stubborn streak and, at the end of a long working day, can be peevish.

When she first got him, Ozzie would run away when she tried to board the bus. Mastering the handicap button on Whatcom’s doors took a lot of tries. “If it didn’t work, he’d stop trying,” she said. “I would have to go around the building, going to each door and making him open it to figure it out. Now he’s on to it totally.”

Her biggest obstacles are people-related. Dog lovers are naturally inclined to reach out and pet him, but that’s a real no-no since he’s not allowed to be petted while working.

“It’s more of a problem for others because they want to touch him and they think it’s sad that they can’t touch him all the time,” Cooper said. But practically speaking, he could trip her if he reaches for a person across from her. Others giving him dog treats is another problem, because it might lead him to take food off plates in a restaurant, which could get her kicked out.

Ozzie has special needs, too. He’s a cat lover, so Cooper got him a cat of his own. “I had to get him one because he likes cats so much he kept running after them,” she said. Now he has his own cat and they sleep in the same bed.

Cooper’s passion is learning, and while she couldn’t become the doctor she hoped to because of her disabilities, she has completed one of her goals – to get her phlebotomy certificate. “It was a good testament to what I could do,” she said.