

Life

BEST FOOT FORWARD

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Despite disability, Molly, the paraplegic pug, takes life in stride



Mandy Evans stood along the edge of the sand with her dog.

"You want to go for a walk on the beach?" she cooed. "You want to go for a walk on the beach?"

Normally, this sort of frenzied baby talk would get most dogs all worked up. But her pug, Molly, didn't so much as wag her curly tail.

She couldn't.

With the lower half of her body paralyzed, she really doesn't have much sensation in it.

Inspired by her day-to-day experiences with her pug, Mrs. Evans has co-founded an online support group called "My Special Dog" for people with disabled pets. The intention of the site is not to focus on what the dogs can't do, but on what they can.

Like going for a walk on Leadbetter Beach.

Granted, Molly does it a bit differently. Mrs. Evans carries her until they reach the hard-packed sand near the water.

"The soft sand gets her wheels stuck," explained Mrs. Evans.

She was referring to the wheels on the back of a cart that essentially act as Molly's hind legs. When a padded bar is placed on her back near her



shoulders and her limp legs are put into stirrups to lift them off the ground, Molly has the ability to run wherever she wants.

Making her way up Leadbetter Beach, she was like any other dog -- stopping to sniff random driftwood, ears perking up when the waves crashed against the shore -- with the possible exception that the tracks she left behind in the sand consisted of two paw prints followed by two uniformly spaced vertical lines.



You can imagine the reaction. Two kids digging in the sand stared at her as she passed by. So did a man and woman in swimsuits. Even a homeless woman said a sympathetic "Awwww" before going back to rummaging through trash cans and talking to the rats inside. Only one person didn't seem to notice that Molly was any different.

"Hi pup!" she nonchalantly said, her words a bit muddled. She, too, was disabled.

Mrs. Evans is used to getting all kinds of responses. They're usually the same, really, only they come out in different ways. "Awwww," incidentally, is the typical one.

"With an occasional 'That's so sad!' or 'You poor thing!' " added Mrs. Evans, who admitted that although she understands it, it frustrates her. "I don't want people to feel sorry for her. She's just like any other dog.

"She's just two legs short!" she said with a chuckle.

Molly has been that way since she was 3 months old. As a result of a birth defect, part of her spine is twisted, cutting off the nerve access from her brain to her back end. It took four veterinarians, including a neurologist, to figure out why she started dragging her back legs four years ago.

"Basically, all the doctors said, 'You really should consider putting her to sleep. She's only 3 months old. You will have a life of this,' " recalled Mrs. Evans. "I was sitting in the doctor's office with my mom and said, 'I can't put her to sleep just because she's not perfect.' "



Not everyone feels that way. Veterinarians confirmed that some clients decide to euthanize their dogs instead of having, say, a limb removed because they think the dog's quality of life will be compromised.



"That's one of the reasons we started the Web site," said Mrs. Evans, who co-founded it with a friend, Kevin Roberson (while his Rottweiler, Bear, isn't disabled, the dog has his own issues -- allergies).

"We're hoping we can build relationships with vets where they will refer people who are facing a potentially difficult decision. They can go into the forums and get immediate responses from people who have been through it."

Indeed, under the "community" section of the Web site, www.myspecialdog.com, there are all kinds of

"special dog" links listed, including blind dogs, deaf dogs, amputee dogs, paralyzed dogs . . .

The "blind dogs" section is the one that most interests Andrea Robinson. Her cocker spaniel mix, Lassie, completely lost her sight as a result of progressive retinal atrophy, or PRA, almost two years ago. Ms. Robinson, a senior at UCSB, knew something was wrong when she went home for a visit and tried to play catch with Lassie.



"She couldn't get the ball at all. Of all the dogs I had, she would be the one to get it first -- even if they had longer legs or whatever," said Ms. Robinson, 53. "I threw the ball and the other dogs would always get it."

Ms. Robinson was traumatized when she found out why.

"I don't think dogs really worry about being blind. They don't beat themselves up and think they're a drain on society," she said. "The biggest adjustment is the psychological one on the part of the owner."



She consulted a psychologist about her fears that her dog would never be the same again. Those fears eventually went away, but not because of anything she was told in a session.

"Nothing has changed," Ms. Robinson said she came to realize about her dog. "She can still catch a ball midair. But she does it by listening to it bounce."

Dr. Susila Bales is also a My Special Dog member.

"It's great to have a support group for all the people out there who have these special animals," she said, "just to know there are other people in that situation."

If anyone knows about that, she does. A veterinarian, now at Noah's Ark Veterinary Clinic in Goleta, she has seen it all. In fact, at her former office, she used to bring in her three-legged dog named Kaputt (German for "broken") to show clients whose dogs were facing similar fates how well the long-haired border collie mix adapted after her back right leg was amputated.

"When her hair is grown in, it's hard to tell she has a missing leg. So, a lot of times, I would have her walk around and have them guess which leg was missing," Dr. Bales said. "A lot of times, they couldn't."

Dr. Bales plans to do the same at her new office.

"I want people to see she's an absolutely normal dog. There's no reason to think she's lacking anything in her life because she only has three legs."



Except, of course, the one leg.

"But she doesn't know that," Dr. Bales pointed out with a laugh. "She can't count."

Indeed, looking at the 87 or so profiles of the various special dogs across the country that pop up on the

opening page of the Web site, there is not a hint that their quality of life is compromised. There's Milo, the "no-eyed dog extraordinaire," who, as a result of a medical condition, has fur where his eyes used to be. The adorable Jack Russell terrier goes for rides to schools and nursing homes, where he shares his story. There's Nesta, a mutt who's also blind, fetching a stick from the water. And, jumping through a hoop, there's Lefty, the bull terrier born bilaterally deaf who knows more than 30 hand signals and has won two agility titles.

The Web site allows owners of such pets to get tips and techniques from others dealing with similar disabilities. Mrs. Evans wishes she had the option to go online and ask questions when Molly became paralyzed -- like what diapers to use. She had to learn the hard way.

"Pampers No. 2 -- they fit the best," she said. "I've tried Huggies, all those. Pampers are firmer, so they stay on."

(Which is important considering that when she's not using the cart, Molly gets around -- quite impressively, as a matter of fact -- by dragging her lower body.)

Molly uses a few diapers per day since she doesn't have control of her bodily functions, but can usually go for a four-hour stretch without any.

"Which is good because it prevents diaper rash," said Mrs. Evans with a chuckle, aware of how strange that sounds.

"She really does get diaper rash. I have Desitin in my cupboard."

There are signs all over their home of the lengths to which Mrs. Evans and her husband, Rick, go to ensure Molly's comfort and well-being. There's a foot-tall fence along the balcony of their Santa Barbara condo to prevent her from falling off (her balance isn't all that great); there's carpeting on the floors, which allows her to get a good grip when she pulls herself around the rooms, although the couple is talking about adding hardwood floors.

"No Pergo!" Mrs. Evans assured. "It doesn't have any grooves. She can't grip it!"

There's also a life jacket hanging on the inside of the shower door that Molly wears during her weekly hydrotherapy sessions in the bathtub. They, along with nightly massages, help prevent her legs from completely atrophying. Mrs. Evans picked up the techniques while taking Molly to physical therapy. After six sessions, she had to give it up. At \$250 -- an hour -- she couldn't afford to continue. That was on top of all of Molly's other expenses, like medications that help prevent the bladder infections to which she's susceptible.

"We have it budgeted that Molly is \$500 a month," said Mrs. Evans.

But what Molly has given her back has been invaluable. It has changed Mrs. Evans' perception of what is considered "normal."

Just as living with a disabled pet has made her forget Molly's differences from other dogs, she said she realized that living with a disabled child likely makes parents forget the child's differences from other boys and girls.

It's only when strangers gawk that they remember.

Mrs. Evans is hoping to change others' perceptions of what is considered "normal" in part by taking Molly to elementary schools. She hopes the children will learn that Molly isn't all that different from other dogs. She accompanies her owner when rollerblading (she just goes in a baby jogger so she can keep up); she sniffs at trees (she just can't lift her leg) and, of course, she goes for walks at the beach.

"Are you ready to go bye-bye?" Mrs. Evans cooed after she and Molly finished up one on a recent day.

You may not have seen Molly's curly tail wagging, but you can bet it was.

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WHAT'S ALL THAT BARKING ABOUT?

If you are interested in Molly visiting your elementary school, you can contact her for more information by e-mailing mandy@myspecialdog.com or clicking on the "contact" button on the Web site www.myspecialdog.com.

TAIL OF INSPIRATION

For more information about special dogs, visit the Web site www.myspecialdog.com.

STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTO

Molly doesn't just run on the beach, she burns rubber. The 4-year-old pug gets around with the assistance of a cart. "We joke about getting her some off-roading wheels, but we haven't done it yet," said owner Mandy Evans.

STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS PHOTO

No one can accuse Molly of being unlicensed. She has a collection of plates from various states for her wheels.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MANDY EVANS

Just one of the guys: Molly visits elementary schools like Crane Country Day School to teach kids about acceptance.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MANDY EVANS

Molly, the paraplegic pug, became partially paralyzed as a pup.

STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS

Roll with it, baby. That's Molly's philosophy about her disability.

COURTESY OF MANDY EVANS

Molly proudly rolled down State Street in this year's Big Dog Parade with Mandy and Rick Evans.

"I don't want people to feel sorry for her. She's just like any other dog. She's just two legs short! "

Mandy Evans, owner of Molly, a paraplegic pug