

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

A Horse Trainer Turns Her Attention to Service Dogs



Lora Tucker, a social worker who lives in Sag Harbor, said her service dog, Mickey, helps her take better care of herself and of her clients.

Margot Kohn

By Margot Kohn

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Mickey the Wonder Dog, Lora Tucker's 10-year-old Shih Tzu, is the happiest dog Ms. Tucker ever met. He's a wonder for another reason, though, she said: Mickey — trained by Carah von Funk — is her service dog, helping her manage her anxiety and physical disability.

Mickey is trained to accompany her into public areas, like restaurants and airplanes, and to provide her with routine as well as support. Ms. Tucker, a social worker who lives in Sag Harbor, believes that Mickey doesn't just let her take better care of herself, but also of her clients.

Mickey was trained by Carah von Funk, also of Sag Harbor, who is the owner of Hamptons Service Dogs, which she started last spring.

A service animal is a dog that has been trained to perform a specific task related to its owner's disability. According to the Americans With Disabilities Act website, service dogs are not required to undergo professional training or official certification. It is up to the owner to see that the animal is properly trained.

Ms. von Funk's clients are split into three categories: families with kids with autism ranging from levels one to three, people struggling with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder, and older adults with mobility issues.

Ms. von Funk, a self-described former "barn rat," grew up riding and training horses. As the only child of an only child, she felt a connection with animals, she said. She attended New York University film school, then law school, before moving to California.

When she was 40, she was diagnosed with epilepsy. Already struggling with anxiety and P.T.S.D., she got a service dog of her own, named Lulu.

Once, she said, when she was in a CVS in California, the nine-pound Lulu was attacked by a large shepherd. The owner claimed it was a service dog. To Ms. von Funk, it obviously was not. The experience, she said, made her realize the importance of properly trained dogs, though it wasn't until she moved to Sag Harbor that she became an official trainer and opened her school.

"I'm 61 years old, and [being a] riding instructor and horse trainer is 12 hours a day — out in, you know, the 100-degree sun on your feet," she said. "People started asking me to help them with their dogs, and I wanted to get out of the horse thing, and I love it."

The training starts on the village's quieter streets, like Division Street, and eventually moves to Main Street and then into restaurants. The dogs must pass a test that evaluates, among other things, its parking lot behavior and elevator navigation.

Barbara Williams, another of Ms. von Funk's clients, said the training had helped her to tame Hudson, her friendly but rambunctious 5-year-old Lhasa Apso-miniature poodle mix.

“She really kind of took the rough edges off him,” Ms. Williams said. After successfully completing his test this spring, Hudson has now gone with Ms. Williams on the Hampton Jitney, trains, and even a plane to Florida. She also takes him to the Sag Harbor Welcome Center at the Long Wharf windmill, where she volunteers.

Ms. von Funk’s work, like Ms. Williams’s, is focused on people.

“When I train the dog,” she said, “it’s like half training the dog and half or more training the person — how to be the leader, and have their dog have faith and confidence in them.”