

## Local group celebrates champions at graduation ceremony

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LIFESTYLES EDITOR

Twelve humans and their canine companions graduated March 24 in front of UNCW's Hoggard Hall. "Celebration of Champions" was held to recognize the human-animal pairs that have successfully completed the service-dog training program at Carolina Canines for Service Dogs (CCS).

The ceremony, led by Jon Evans of WWAY-TV 3, included service dog demonstrations, an acknowledgement of volunteers and heartfelt comments from several of the graduating recipients.

"To say this dog and Carolina Canines has changed my life is an understatement," Diane Godwin said of her dog Samson. "They gave me back my life." Another graduating recipient, Jeffrey Haught of Largo, Fla., was unable to be at the ceremony, but sent a letter to share his story with the audience. Haught suffers from incapacitating angina pain from a damaged heart and cannot walk across a room without gasping for breath.

"(Moses) truly has enhanced the quality of my life and has been a life saver," Haught said in his letter. Moses, a Labrador retriever, was able to sense when

Haught was having a silent heart attack last year, before Haught even knew what was happening. The dog was able to get Haught to a phone and eventually to the hospital in time to save his life.

The training process is intense for these animals and the recipients, but once it is completed they can work together as a team to perform day-to-day activities. Potential service dogs are placed into foster homes as puppies, and when they reach about two years of age, they begin the training that may last up to a year.

The dogs chosen for service work are carefully monitored to ensure that their health and temperament meet the strict



David Mickler and his service dog Saint celebrated completion of the training program with Carolina Canines.

or distant objects "as small as the back of pierced earring to as large as a briefcase," said Rick Hairston, executive director of CCS.

Although many service dog organizations charge recipients for their dogs,

requirements set forth by the organization. The dogs are then placed with recipients. The team begins intense training to allow the human partner to learn the commands and to help the dog learn how to deal with the recipient's disability.

Service dogs can turn on lights, open doors, pull wheelchairs and assist with household tasks.

The dogs also retrieve dropped

Carolina Canines are provided free of charge to individuals with disabilities. According to the group's Web site, the estimated cost of a service dog from breeding through placement is between \$15,000 and \$20,000.

The non-profit group recently received a \$16,000 grant to help with these costs from the GCF Community Foundation, Inc., the organization that handles all donations for Goodwill Industries of North Carolina.

"Carolina Canines provides a wonderful service because their dogs help (these people) in everyday life," said Becky Lytle, communications associate for the GCF Community Foundation.

Rick and Dee Hairston began CCS in Wilmington in 1996 because there were no service dog organizations in South-eastern North Carolina. CCS is expanding to Raleigh and will soon include dogs that assist with blindness and dogs that can warn epileptics of oncoming seizures.

The program now includes more than 50 volunteers and 12 Board Members. For more information on how to become a volunteer or how to receive a service dog from Carolina Canines for Service visit their Web site at [www.carolinacanines.com](http://www.carolinacanines.com).

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