

Confetti Rules

This Mighty Mini is the Perfect Guide Horse

by Terry Temple

People with disabilities of all kinds find a higher quality of life through their guide animals. We usually associate guide animals with dogs, but there's been a movement underway since 1999 to use horses, particularly minis, as the companions of challenged individuals. The advantages of a guide horse are many, particularly for people who are allergic or afraid of dogs, who have a special affection for horses, and/or have a desire for a guide animal with a much longer lifespan than the canine counterpart. The last motivation is how Cheryl Spencer came to know and love Confetti, a 27" miniature who has taken the Spencers, Jacksonville, Florida and everywhere she goes by storm.

As a teenager, Cheryl lived through the cruel nightmare of slowly losing her sight. A series of events and operations caused total blindness by age 18 and turned her "world upside down", as she says. At first, Cheryl wanted nothing to do with the service of a guide dog, and much less fathom getting a horse for the job.

"I was a typical junior in high school, who had to stop and go through hell. I wound up back two years later as a junior in a high school, but this time it was in a school for the blind," she says. But Cheryl, gentle readers, is a fierce spirit. "By my early 20s, I was living on my own, relying on my cane and pretty much defiantly independent. But finally, it got to the point to 'Why not accept help? Why not make life easier?'"

Cheryl's first guide was Tammy, a German Shepherd who came to her through the good works of Leader Dogs for the Blind. Cheryl and Tammy became as close as two partners can be and Cheryl was able to survive and thrive in an independent life style. When Tammy passed of old age at 14 1/2, Cheryl experienced that utter grief, which eventually was eased by time and Delta, her new companion dog from Southeastern Guide Dogs. (Most companion animal organizations are non-profits and rely on the kindness of donors and volunteers. Each and every one should be applauded for their efforts.)

A decade or so passed and Delta reached the end of her career as a useful companion and eventually her years. By this time, Cheryl knew she couldn't exist as well as she was without a new guide, but the thought of taking on another dog was daunting.

"I said to (my husband) Chris, I just can't do this again. You get so attached to dogs and they just don't live long enough. The pain is too great when they go and at my age, I'd need to develop this special relationship with several more guide dogs."

One day, Cheryl's sister Karen sent them an article in People Magazine about one of the first miniature guide horses, which discussed their amazing longevity. (Minis typically live healthily into their 30-40s and even 50s. The oldest living miniature horse on record was Angel, a 52 year old mare.) Cheryl's grandparents always had horses and her fondness and memories were in the right place to seriously consider a mini-horse guide.

Research began. They started with the Guide Horse Foundation, visiting founder Janet Burlison's North Carolina ranch in 2001 to see if Cheryl would be a match for a miniature guide horse. The weekend flew by as she worked with the trainers and different guide horses-in-training. Having had two guide dogs previously, she was very aware of what she wanted from her companion and quickly knew that a horse could fulfill those needs.

"I was ready to sign on the dotted line when they told me the bad news," she recalls. "Number 74 on the list. Probably years away from receiving a trained and certified mini." Little did they know that during that same week in 2001, the lovely Princess Confetti was being born on a ranch down in Christmas, Florida.

specifically for Cheryl. Since their knowledge of the horse community in Jacksonville was none, this process took a year and a lot of contacts with people in the horse community. Finally, a local horse trainer named Debbie King volunteered her services as a community service project and to the Spencers' delight, agreed to do the basic training when a horse became available.

The candidates would have to pass a Field Intelligence Test (see sidebar), have a tractable, calm disposition and the Spencers were counseled to look for a mini 26" or under. More research revealed the e-mail list of Florida miniature horse farms, which they used to broadcast this message:

"Looking for a special mini to be trained as a guide for the blind."

Barbara McDermott, owner and operator of JBR Ranch in Christmas, Florida, answered that call. Confetti was then 14 months old, a golden Appaloosa of what Barbara thought was uncommon intelligence. Problem was, she was 27" tall, just over the suggested height.

"What's an inch, what's an inch!" whooped Cheryl as she made arrangements to meet at the ranch. The Spencers and trainer Debbie went down to Christmas and gave Confetti the Field Intelligence Test, which, even though she was only halter trained, she passed with flying colors.

The Jacksonville Council of the Blind had arranged a special tax credit for whoever would donate a potential guide for Cheryl, and Barbara accepted the program with caveats. Confetti would go to the Spencers via Debbie King's training barn, with the express condition that Confetti would complete the training and be certified. Cheryl and Chris would come to remember this time as "Christmas in July" because that 13th day of the seventh month, 2002, Confetti would change their lives.

Confetti Goes to Work

Says Chris: "Confetti went directly to Debbie King's farm from JBR Ranch. Debbie worked with her for about two months and accomplished a lot. She taught Confetti voice commands: stop, stand, left, right and walk. She also taught her to go around obstacles and stop at curbs and to accept the harness.

"Debbie took her to malls and stores, walking with her in all kinds of places getting her used to being around people. She even took Confetti to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Celebration that first month when she'd only been working with Confetti for a couple of weeks. She taught Confetti to walk on the left, which is where she needed to be to guide Cheryl.

"We even took Confetti to be on the Channel 4 morning show, all in the first month of training! Of course, we were involved in some of the training and actually used Delta (Cheryl's aging guide dog) to show Confetti what to do."

Hardship Arrives

Two months into the program, Debbie lost her barn. She suggested another farm where Confetti could stay while they found a replacement trainer – they had four months to find one, according to their contract with Barbara. They took her to the new farm and visited her every day.

"It was a very stressful time," understates Cheryl. "We really felt the clock ticking because we had no idea how to find another trainer and it turned out that the new farm's only available stall was fully enclosed for a thoroughbred, which is not, as we later found out, a good thing for minis.

"You must understand, we were totally ignorant of horse care but we did know we didn't like her being closed up like that," Chris goes on. "I was convinced that Confetti needed to come live with us."

After just a week of solitary confinement at the new farm, Confetti came home to the suburbs of Jacksonville.

Finding the new trainer now became the top priority and time was running out. Beth, the wife of their farrier Todd Thurston would turn out to be their Godsend and found their new cohort. Gail Ray of Silver Meadows Farms, Anthony, Florida agreed to help them train Confetti and all involved decided to move her again into a barn atmosphere would not be a good idea.

One of the main objections "civilians" (non-horse people) have about equine service animals is potty-time (although given the choice of stepping on a horse chip or a dog mound – well, what would you pick?). The Spencers knew that in order for Confetti to be a good public citizen, she would have to become as "house-trained" as her canine counterparts. Chris took plenty of time observing her habits, and they set up key words to help the training, which they decided to euphemize for this article.

"We didn't realize that horses consider urination a totally different action from defecation and two keywords would be necessary. Anyway, whenever she relieved herself in the yard, I called to her "Good girl! Good "keyword for the act" and if she did it in the screen room, I used a scolding voice and said "Bad girl! No "keyword for the act. She eventually got the idea – it took about two months and Delta definitely helped. If I had it to do over again, I would try another approach because treats work very well with her. I think I could have been successful more quickly if I had used treats as a reward for good behavior as I do now."

Gayle was available to help by phone and they relied on her expert advice. But sometimes it's two steps forward, one step back. Chris goes on, "What John Lyons said in one of his books rings so true: 'When you think the horse understands what you are asking him to do, he really doesn't have a clue.' And there is another thing that I have to say about mares in general, and this one in particular - 'Hell hath no fury like a lead mare scorned!' Confetti sometimes had a hard time accepting that she has to take directions from Cheryl, and that Cheryl is really the lead mare, even though Confetti is convinced that she has that status.

Certification

On November 6th, 2004, the Florida Service Dogs Inc. set up a grueling observation test to certify Confetti as a guide companion. Over the course of three and a half hours, Cheryl and Confetti (who look alike and share the same hair color, by the way) were video taped going in and out of vehicles, traffic, malls, obstacles, curbs, crowd control – everything that is demanded of a canine guide, Confetti conquered. When the team passed the course at the end of that long afternoon, they became the first owner-trained equine companion pair in the country.

Since then, the Spencers and Confetti have been on a cruise and flown in an airplane. They've taken her to theme parks, where they draw crowds as if they were part of the show. People marvel everywhere they go. Chris relates a story:

"The night of the ADA Celebration, we were leaving the Adams Mark and a man came out of the bar in the lobby and said, 'Hi, I was in line in front of you in Wal-Mart this afternoon.' Then he turns to his lady and says, 'See, honey? I wasn't making it up!' Then, of course, came the Q/A and picture session."

Do they ever feel the burden of too much attention? "No!" husband and wife say together in this interview. "We consider ourselves as ambassadors for guide horses. Of course, Confetti turns into a ham whenever there is a camera pointed in her direction. What really amazes me is that when Confetti is in guide mode, she is totally focused on guiding. When we stop to talk with people, she turns into a living stuffed animal that everyone wants to touch. They cannot believe their eyes."