

Katherine R. Huggins

Team Aspen

teamaspen@grapevine.net

**Aspen's foundation skills:**

Basic obedience-sit, down, recall, stay, heel Leave it Find/Refind Basic retrieve Basic targeting Scent discrimination

**Aspen's service dog behaviors:**

Assisting with mobility and balance Providing a medical alert (pre-seizure alert)  
Retrieving dropped items Finding an item or person by name Carrying or delivering items  
Opening and closing doors Turning lights on and off Pushing buttons when my fine motor control is off

I am often asked how many behaviors Aspen "knows". Most people expect me to answer with the number of cues in her vocabulary. When training behaviors I focused on being able to link or chain behaviors together not on how many words Aspen recognizes as cues.

**Aspen's Achievements:**

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 1996         | Canine Good Citizen™  |
| 1998 to 2005 | Registered as Delta Society Pet Partners™ Team<br>Presented life safety programs on dog bite prevention<br>Visited rehab units in local hospitals |
| 2000         | Delta Society Beyond Limits Award™<br>Central Region Service Dog of the Year  |
| 2002         | AKC Award of Canine Excellence (ACE)  |

## Honorable Mention Service Dog Category

2006 AKC Award of Canine Excellence (ACE)  
Recipient in the Service Dog Category

Embark on a journey of discovery Focus on ability, excellence & teamwork Believe in yourself Dare to be different Become more than anyone ever imagined Create positive changes Take advantage of teachable moments Inspire others Simply become who you are & Remember from where you came

### Simply Become Team Aspen Sher-Mi Labradors

The veterinarian called and shared the test results. Ruby, my Daschund/Labrador companion dog, was in renal failure. The veterinarian assured me we had done everything we could medically. I made the difficult decision to euthanize Ruby. Ruby had been my companion for 14 years shadowing me every step of the way.

When I contacted Sherry I wasn't sure I was ready for a puppy. Sherry actively listened as I expressed my grief over Ruby. She suggested I come visit the current litter and go with my heart-if it was time for another dog I would know. If I needed more time I could regroup and wait for another litter.

This time I wanted a purebred puppy. I was looking for a puppy with the ability to problem solve-one that would be more than just a companion dog. I wanted a sound working dog that could assist me with whatever I happened to be doing.

The puppies milled around in the open area of the kennel. I watched and wondered how I would ever tell them apart. Sherry had chosen a puppy she felt would match my criteria but suggested that I observe the puppies to see if I picked out the same one she had in mind. One of the puppies came up to me, untied both of my shoe laces then backed up a couple of steps to admire her handiwork. The puppy made eye contact and grinned. This would be my initiation to Labrador humor.

I observed the puppies interact with each other and tried to sort them out. Sherry brought out a duck wing engaging the puppies attention. The puppy who untied my shoes was intensely focused on the duck wing even after all of the other puppies had lost interest and crashed for naps. This puppy was not going to give up tracking down the duck wing. I picked the puppy up to hold her. Our eyes met and we connected. It

was as if the puppy was looking into my soul. I knew in my heart this was the puppy I was looking for. Sherry knowingly smiled it was the puppy she had chosen for me.

Sher-Mi Golden Quaking Aspen aka Aspen and I embarked on our first adventure-the hour and a half ride back home.

## Imagine

When I purchased Aspen as an eight week old puppy my only experience training was with my previous shelter rescue dog Ruby. Ruby's trained behaviors consisted of basic pet manners. Aspen's breeder, Sherry Anderson, graciously trusted me to follow through with what I promised to do-provide Aspen with a "working home" and train Aspen to her full potential as my service dog.

I could never have imagined how far we would come as a team. Initially, we were an awkward pair-a puppy with boundless energy in the hands of a novice trainer not quite certain how to proceed. Sherry assured me whenever I needed technical assistance or had questions all I had to do was give her a call. True to her word she has kept in close contact with us for the past 11 years.

I enrolled Aspen in a puppy class, researched training methods, accumulated a reference library, attended seminars and received coached practice by nationally recognized educators like Ogden Lindsley (B.F. Skinner's lab assistant), Gary Wilkes, Karen Pryor and Kris Butler. I recognized that the laws of learning I utilized as a fire service instructor and Public Fire & Life Safety Educator were universal and applicable to training dogs. An incredible light bulb moment that would forever change Team Aspen!

My experience designing lesson plans and skills checklists for fire and life safety classes gave me a stepping stone to begin designing individualized canine lesson plans for my own use with Aspen and later for veterinary referral clients from Dr. Tim Jones, DVM owner of Companion Animal Hospital in Baldwin City, Kansas. Over a six year period I was able to observe at Companion Animal Hospital with Dr. Jones, and work with veterinary referral clients provided the experience I needed to work with all types of dogs and their often "problem" owners.

Aspen has dedicated her heart and soul to making a difference in my life, and the lives of others, for the past 11 years. I believe Aspen came into my life with a very specific purpose-to teach me that together we could make a difference in the world one step, one dog, one person at a time.

*Aspen has taught me to believe in myself  
and to become a positive change maker*

## Believe

When Aspen turned six months old an amazing thing happened. She gave me the first of what would be many medical alerts. Initially, I didn't understand how critical this behavior would become. All I knew at that point was I might have finally found a way to accurately predict an oncoming seizure. The medications I had tried had not been effective. I wasn't very accurate at predicting an oncoming seizure.

Eleven years ago there wasn't much documentation of a dog's ability to provide any type of medical alert. Aspen, Jess and I would have to stand our ground in the face of doubting physicians, family members and friends. We worked on refining Aspen's alert behavior positively reinforcing her each time. Rather than teaching Aspen a signal we went with the behavior she did naturally letting her make eye contact then bump me with her nose.

Over time we have been able to unravel the mystery to Aspen's alerts. Initially, we thought she was keying in on my body language until she started coming to find me when I was in another room. Today we know Aspen is detecting changes in my electrolyte balance-glucose and potassium by scent, and probably "feels" any electrical changes. She is also highly sensitive to changes in my breathing pattern and any sudden drop in blood pressure.

Aspen's ability to give me a 30 minute warning to an oncoming seizure has given me the gift of freedom and allows me to lead an active life. Aspen has demonstrated the ability to alert not only on me but on family members, friends and other animals.

*Aspen has taught me to keep an open mind and trust her judgement.*

## Impact

My life has been profoundly changed by Aspen's presence. Prior to being partnered with Aspen I was one of the invisible members of society. I was using fore arm crutches and had an awkward mechanical gait. Few people made eye contact with me. When I struggled to open commercial doors no one offered assistance. If I dropped something people pretended not to notice. People rarely talked to me or returned a smile even if I smiled at them first. It was as if I was transparent.

Initially, I wasn't prepared for the sudden shock of being visible. It should have occurred to me that anyone accompanied by a happy, yellow Labrador Retriever, would receive attention. It is difficult not to be noticed when partnered with a service dog; especially, a service dog that is enjoying her work. Suddenly, I felt like I was under a microscope.

I decided that Team Aspen would become a user friendly team. I wanted to take full advantage of "teachable moments" when someone asked about Aspen. Taking time is especially important when children are involved. Perhaps Aspen and I could remove some of the barriers service dog teams face with the general public -being accepted, public access, and the role a service dog plays in a disabled person's life.

## Grace

Aspen has graciously welcomed one hundred thirty (130) veterinary referral clients and their dogs into our life for behavior modification. Aspen is my translator as I continue to learn the canine language. Aspen's cues have kept me from being bitten on more than one occasion. Aspen serves as a mentor to each dog/handler team we teach-demonstrating skills, sharing her space, helping me get the point across to dog and handler and gently reminding me that I am human.

The client dog is clueless. He watched me place a cookie in the Kong™ toy but has no idea how to get it out. He tries pawing, licking and then loses interest. Aspen flaps her ears and asks if she might be the demo dog. Curious as to what she will do I release her from her down stay mat. Aspen picks up the Kong™ toy then bounces it on the floor so a cookie falls out. What she does next catches me off guard. Instead of eating the cookie herself Aspen backs away from the cookie and wags her tail encouraging the client's dog to eat the prize. The dog carefully reads Aspen's body language then wolfs down the cookie.

My client asks "How did you teach Aspen to do that?" I reply "I'd love to take credit for the demonstration but that isn't one of Aspen's demo dog behavior chains. She thought of it herself."

The client's dog approaches the Kong™. He bounces the Kong™ and succeeds in dislodging a cookie. Satisfied with her effort Aspen returns to her mat and resumes her nap. I am in awe of Aspen's ability and am humbled.

***Aspen's lesson for the day:***  
***Never ever skip a critical element when teaching a dog or a human.***

## Ability

“What were you thinking? You do realize you’re disabled don’t you?” my physician exclaims as he looks at the photo. “Actually, at the time I was thinking about how thankful I was that Aspen and I were executing the last demonstration for the two day class” I reply. Obviously, this wasn’t the answer my physician was expecting.

For a brief moment in time I was free from Cerebral Palsy, intractable chronic pain and seizures. I was able to do something with my service dog that no one else could do. Aspen was able to do something most dogs never do...fly. Aspen believes in me and together (with the help of the power team) we believe we can fly.

Other people may define me by my disability. Aspen has helped me realize that my disability doesn’t define me. I define myself by my abilities.

*Aspen accepts me for who I am.*

## Teamwork

What started as a sinus infection evolved into more serious problem. Aspen has a shadow behind her left eye. The specialists have been unable to diagnose the problem. Her right retina has detached. Between the shadow and detached retina Aspen has low to zero vision. The ophthalmologist suggests I make the most of the time Aspen and I have left together. Nothing can ease the heartbreak that I feel. Aspen sits next to me and puts her chin on my shoulder. “Try not to worry. We’ll work through this” I whisper as tears streak down my face.

One thing I am certain of. If Aspen thinks she is no longer helping me she will become depressed and shut down. My plan is to keep Aspen as mentally and physically active as possible. I will gradually ease Aspen into retirement allowing her to make the decision on how much she feels like doing.

Think! There has to be a way to give Aspen a map so she can navigate around the house and property independently. I decide to try transferring Aspen’s targeting skills from sight to scent. Vanilla scented dots are placed at strategic points in the house. I cue Aspen to sniff/touch helping guide her nose to bump the first dot. I reinforce the effort. I cue Aspen to find the next dot. She air scents and proceeds down the hall

stopping to touch the second dot.

Once Aspen has the idea that the scent dots are markers we test the theory. Aspen starts in the bedroom on her bed touching the dot. I cue her to go to the back door so we can go outside. Aspen finds the dot on the bedroom door then makes a right turn into the hall. Charging down the hall at a dead run she stops at the next dot, repositions herself and trots diagonally across the kitchen to the back door. Aspen has learned to connect the dots. She does a happy dance in celebration of her new found freedom. It is the first time she has been able to run in several months without running into something.

Aspen has spent her life helping me. Her assistance with my balance has given me the gift of fluid motion that was never possible with fore arm crutches. She still patiently picks up dropped items, carries equipment and gives me a medical alert.

## Patience

The rookie fire fighters are caught off guard. An instructor with a disability accompanied by a service dog doesn't fit the traditional fire service expectancy set. Aspen is sensitive to the class climate and looks to me for clarification. I ruffle her ears and whisper "Patience".

Aspen passively alerted on Jimmy, as a student most likely to panic, on his first trip up the stairs of the fire department training tower. I have been watching him closely. He is terrified of heights but is more terrified of failing rookie class and being embarrassed in front of his peer group.

Jimmy descends to the third story window so I can observe his lock off technique. Jimmy becomes tangled and panics. Jimmy's eyes have taken on a glazed look. He isn't responding to my instructions. I make sure Jimmy's safety line is locked off and alert team members on the roof of my actions. I know I have only a few seconds to take action before he starts thrashing around.

I calmly explain what I am about to do "Jimmy, you're locked off. You aren't going anywhere. I'm going to pull you in the window." I clip a short tag line on Jimmy's harness and give it to Aspen. I cue Aspen to tug and she helps me haul Jimmy through the window then maintains tension on the tag line keeping him stable while I quickly fix the problem. I give Jimmy a few minutes to regain his composure and ask if he wants

to go back out the window. Once clear of the window he completes his descent. I touch the rappel line and can feel the tremors vibrating up the rope.

Aspen cocks her head and listens to the voices on the roof. An assisting instructor bounds down the stairs “Oh good you’re here! Jimmy says he isn’t rappelling unless you and Aspen are at the window”. I smile “Tell Jimmy we’ll be here”. Our reputation as the calming presence at the window and the ability to patiently untangle and/or rescue a student has quietly established itself.

Jimmy slowly descends to the window and shakily locks off his descent device. “Where’s Aspen?” he asks. “Relax your legs, swing in the window and have a look” I suggest. Aspen grins and wags her tail. “While you’re here could you do me a favor?” I ask. Jimmy looks puzzled but nods. I hand him a dog cookie to give to Aspen. Without realizing it Jimmy has just reached a milestone in learning rope rescue. He is trusting the equipment and has redirected his focus to Aspen instead of being terrified! For the first time he has let go of the rope, while locked off, and performed a task without getting tangled! As Jimmy resumes his descent Aspen and I do a happy dog dance to celebrate!

**Aspen helps me focus on finding a quiet rhythm in my teaching. I make a conscious effort to leave my ego in the truck, focus on reinforcing each appropriate behavior and try to set each student up for success.**

## Generalizing

Aspen and I are hanging twenty five feet in the air, off a fire department training tower, executing a hoisting and lowering demonstration during a high angle rope rescue class. My muscle tone is running tight as usual and I am having difficulty setting my feet at the second story window. Suddenly I can’t reach the wall at all. I look down to check the fire fighter minding my tag line.

Fire fighters enjoy humor and will often test an instructor or fellow fire fighter while tending a belay line. The belayer steps back a couple of steps tightening the rappel line and gradually pulling their victim out from the building. The entire group then watches how long it takes for the person rappelling to figure out why he/she can’t keep his/her feet on the wall. This time my belay man is minding his manners.

I check Aspen. She has reached out with her front feet and has them planted on the window sill. She looks up and grins at me. “So, you’re the one!” the words come out as laughter. Aspen has just generalized one of her most important jobs to the current

context of hanging around on the tower. Aspen is doing her best to keep my feet under me so I can regain my balance. Normally, this means keeping me upright as I walk. “Good job big dog!” I give the cue “out” so Aspen will push off from the building and let me walk us down the wall.

*According to textbooks on dog behavior dogs have difficulty generalizing behaviors (transfer of learning). Dogs are said to be context specific. The textbook authors have never met Aspen.*

## Courage

It is a gorgeous spring day on the Illinois river. Aspen and I are helping teach a fire department swift water rescue class. Aspen and I receive our assignment during the safety briefing. We will be the last downstream safety should any of the students drift out of bounds. If I can't reach the student with a throw bag I will send Aspen on a go out to tow the student in.

I look down river at the designated sand bar. The river bank is littered with large rocks that pose a safety problem for both of us. Picking my way through the rocks will be nearly impossible with my lack of balance and limited range of motion. I won't risk the possibility of injuring Aspen by asking her to keep me balanced on dangerous footing. My forearm crutches will be virtually useless. We will have to solve the problem another way. I grin at Aspen “Let's float”.

I position Aspen perpendicular to my body and give her the cue “Big Hug”. The cue tells her I need her to be absolutely relaxed and still. This allows me to maintain a defensive swim position to protect us and keep us on course. A quick visual reading of the river and I know where the strongest current will be. By using a ferry angle the current will vector us directly to the sand bar. As we near the sand bar I cue Aspen to swim while I hold on to the tab on her flotation vest. She pulls me to my feet in the shallow water and we take our position on the sand bar. “Good job, big dog!” I say as I give Aspen a pat on the head. I signal the lead instructor upstream Team Aspen is ready, willing and able.

## Trust

If Aspen becomes disoriented or tangled in something at her feet I have taught her to automatically stand still until I get to her or give her the next cue. I am thankful Aspen

learned directional cues and can still work off lead.

Fatigue has set in and I cannot walk back up to the workshop. I need Aspen to deliver a set of keys to my partner Jess. I clip the keys to Aspen's collar and give her the find cue. Aspen hesitates-she hasn't been up to the workshop by herself. I have always walked with her as her guide. I reassure Aspen "I know you can do this"

I send Aspen along the fence line so she has a reference point then ask her to turn and negotiate the open space between the fence and workshop. I watch for surface changes and cue her to stop then take a single step forward so she can mark each change. Aspen follows each directional cue and finds the door to the shop. I cue her to go inside and find Jess by scent. Aspen finds Jess, delivers the keys and follows her scent trail back to me. "Good job big dog!" I pat her on the chest.

## Transition

From the first moment our eyes met Aspen and I connected. The bond I have with Aspen cannot be adequately expressed in words. It is as if we are connected by an invisible thread. We feel each other's life energy. The trust we have gained through teamwork has strengthened our bond.

Aspen and I walk the back acre and find a place to sit where Aspen can survey her world. I spend time in quiet reflection over the day's events. The frustration of the day has finally caught up with me and tears roll down my cheeks. Aspen places her chin on my shoulder and makes a humming sound. "The doctor says he can't fix the major nerve damage in my spine" I say softly.

Aspen may not be able to comprehend the meaning of all of the words but she can comprehend that I am frustrated and am in pain. She listens intently as I explain I need to consider using a wheelchair to minimize my fall risk and conserve energy. Aspen looks into my eyes and wags the tip of her tail. I think in her own way she is trying to tell me what I told her not long ago "Try not to worry. We'll work through this together".

Aspen and I will take one day a step at a time maintaining a positive attitude and handling what the future holds with as much grace and dignity as possible.

I already know one thing for certain-

**Together we can accomplish what one never could alone**

## Create

The past year has been a year of transition for Team Aspen. My partner Jess and I completed our work at the University of Kansas in the fire fighter certification program. We moved from Baldwin City, Kansas home to Enid, Oklahoma to set up for Team Aspen's next journey. The dream of setting up a small service dog program is slowly but steadily becoming a reality.

The 40 ft. x 50 ft. building that will house Jess' workshop and the service dog training classroom just passed its final code inspection. The classroom consists of an open bay area to provide a space to work dogs year round. It also includes a small skills apartment and a break room to facilitate context based behavior training.

The skills Jess and I utilized in designing curriculum and certification programs, for fire service for the past 15 years, has been redirected to designing curriculum for training service dogs. The curriculum will contain objective based lesson plans and skills checklists for each level of training and each type of service dog.

Once up and running the focus of the program will be matching children with disabilities, age 10-18, with a service dog. We hope to provide a resource to Oklahomans that is presently not available.

## AKC ACE Award

Receiving the 2006 AKC ACE Award Service Dog Category is the highest honor we could hope to receive as a team. The award is bittersweet because it is a hallmark befitting Aspen's retirement and is also the celebration of the new beginning of an apprentice puppy. While waiting for official confirmation of Aspen's award a very special Sher-Mi litter made their entrance into the world. Team Aspen has waited a year for this particular litter because it will most likely produce the traits that make for an excellent service dog with problem solving ability. Apprentice puppy, Willow, has some large paws to fill if she follows in Aspen's pawprints. Aspen will no doubt be a positive mentor helping teach Willow what it truly means to be a member of Team Aspen.

[Let the adventure begin again!](#)