



How a Poodle Named *Kissable* *Katie* Changed a Life

Meet the service dog who won a 2024 AKC Humane Fund Award for Canine Excellence by transforming her handler's life.

By Jen Reeder

When Jill Dempsey found her life at a major fork in the road, a Standard Poodle named Kissable Katie led her down a path of possibility.

Dempsey became legally blind when she was 21, after a brain surgery went wrong. She suffered a hemorrhagic stroke and wound up in a coma.

“When I woke up, I was blind, had dif-

ficulty speaking, and couldn't walk or feed myself,” she recalls. “I couldn't live alone.”

Her family cared for her for decades, but within the span of two years, her mother, father, and older brother died. So in 2014, Dempsey faced a choice: enter an assisted living facility, or learn to live independently.

She fervently wanted to stay in her house in Palm Coast, Florida.



So she reached out to Freedom Guide Dogs, a nonprofit with a program called “Hometown Training.” For six weeks, trainers brought potential guide dogs to Dempsey’s home to try to find the perfect match.

One dog proved too young and rambunctious. Another walked too slowly for Dempsey. Then she started a trial run with Kissable Katie and a trainer by heading to a doctor’s office. While they were in the waiting room, something extraordinary happened.

“Katie barked one time and went up to the nurse’s station. Three minutes later, I had an epileptic seizure,” she says. “The doctor said, ‘That dog alerted that you were going to have a seizure. That is the dog you need to have.’”

Learning on the Fly

Dempsey agreed. Still, partnering with a service dog without a trainer nearby felt scary. She’d never even owned a pet dog.

“How do you trust that dog at your side? Is that dog going to chase a squirrel and run away and leave you standing there?” Dempsey says. “Katie wasn’t like that. Katie was firm and solid and comforting. She gave me hope.”

That hope helped Dempsey leave the “safe haven” of home—which she’d rarely left for years. She practiced walking with Katie out the front door and turning right or left to walk past a house or two.

One day, a new neighbor, Sharon McAnnany, introduced herself to the pair while she was walking her dog, Sam.

“We started talking because Jill’s very

friendly, and she said she only walked certain parts of the street because she couldn’t read the street signs,” McAnnany says. “I said, ‘Well, then come walk around the block with me and my dog.’ So we did, and from there she just took off. I think Katie and Jill are totally amazing.”

The duo’s next major outing was to a doctor’s appointment. Dempsey enrolled in a transportation service for people with disabilities and “gave Katie permission to take control.”

When they were dropped off, she asked her dog to “find inside.” Once inside, they found the front desk to ask where the office was. Then she said, “Katie, find the elevator,” and they got in the elevator. “Katie, help me find two,” and the dog helped her locate the button with braille for the second floor. “Katie, find left,” and they turned left to enter the office. Later, they repeated the experience in reverse to get home.

“Katie was my inspiration,” she says. “She just has this calm about her: ‘We’ve got this. I’m not going to abandon you.’”

“She gave me the impression, ‘Yes, we can.’”

One Amazing Dog

Their bond continued to strengthen thanks to Katie’s prowess not just as a guide dog, but through medical alert. The Poodle alerts Dempsey to impending seizures and is trained to find help if she has a seizure in public. At home, she is trained to use a medical alert box—and she has done so.

“Katie has had to call rescue to help me when I’ve been unconscious after a seizure,” she says. “She has tapped the medical alert button, barked to tell them there was an emergency, unlocked my door, and brought rescue to me.”

She’s opened metaphorical doors, too. Now Dempsey enjoys birdwatching with Kissable Katie and her friend Michelle Bridges at Audubon Society events. Not only can she identify birds by their songs,



Left: “Katie is my guardian angel,” says Jill Dempsey. “I’m not doing things the way I thought or expected I would, but Katie has helped put me on the path that God wants me to take.” Right: Dempsey in costume for a reenactment, with Katie (right) and Sir Enoch.

but she can hear rustling and let Bridges know where to point her binoculars.



Katie once helped save the life of a man in the audience at a CFDA state match in Virginia, according to Jill Dempsey. “Katie was on stage with me. I was registering people for a match. She jumped off stage and ran to a man who was having cardiac arrhythmias and who was about to have a heart attack, and she barked and got him medical help,” she says. “Katie has not only saved my life, but at least two other lives that we know of.”

“Jill can guess about the size of the bird from the type of movement, whether it was a flutter or a big flapping thing,” Bridges says. “I call us the blind leading the blond.”

During one bird walk, Bridges invited Dempsey to come to a Cowboy Fast Draw Association (CFDA) competition. Shooters stand at a line and at a visual cue, fire guns with wax bullets at targets to determine who has the fastest draw.

Dempsey arrived in dark glasses with Kissable Katie and a white cane and said she’d like to sign up.

“They literally didn’t know what to do with me. They joke now they thought I was a lawyer with the ADA trying to trip up the gun club,” Dempsey says with a laugh.

The executive director of the group, Cal “Quick Cal” Eilrich, values inclusivity and got on the phone. He knew of a blind shooter who would ask a helper to tap the target to help her align, and he shared that tip with her. Later, he designed an audible signal system for Dempsey, since everyone else fires when a light flashes.

Dempsey—who goes by the cowboy

alias “Blue Hawk” after her favorite bird—proved a natural, and Kissable Katie stayed steady even with guns firing, calmly guiding Blue Hawk to and from the starting line.

Blue Hawk went on to win the ladies’ division in the CFDA’s 2017 Florida State Championship, and Kissable Katie is now the only dog who is an honorary member of the CFDA.

“She’s Blue Hawk’s sidekick,” Eilrich says. “Our membership is in awe of Blue Hawk and they all love Kissable Katie. They’re part of our CFDA family.”

CFDA was a springboard to more fun for the pair, like Western reenactments. Dempsey and Katie dress in 1860s clothing for “good versus bad” scenarios.

“Katie had to wonder why I was doing the things I was doing: sitting on a train that was being robbed or pretending to be a bank teller in a bank that was getting robbed while people were shooting around us,” she says. “She trusted me that I would protect her and have her back and I trusted her that she wasn’t going to abandon me.”

Solo Service Dogs (Or: What should you do if a service dog approaches without their handler?)

If Jill Dempsey has an epileptic seizure in public, Kissable Katie is trained to go find help. She's concerned that many people don't know what to do if approached by a service dog without a handler.

"If you ever see a service dog in a vest and harness by itself, the dog is not trying to hurt you. The dog is not lost. The dog is trying to get help for its handler," she says. "Follow the dog."

Giving Back—and Receiving Recognition

Dempsey is so grateful to Kissable Katie and all the people who have supported her journey to having such a full, rewarding life that she gives back by volunteering over 1,000 hours of her time each year.

Three days a week, she volunteers as a citizen observer patrol dispatcher for the



"I love Katie's regal demeanor. Nothing fazes her. Nothing sends her into a tizzy. She is always cool, calm, collected, and composed. She is Princess Kate," Jill Dempsey says.

Flagler County Sheriff's Office, helping members of the community get services. She also raises money and awareness for service dog organizations, including Old Glory Service Dogs 4 Veterans and Pop Smoke K9 for Veterans.

Bridges, a Navy veteran, says she knows several veterans who've partnered with service dogs after meeting Dempsey and Kissable Katie. She's delighted that the American Kennel Club named Kissable Katie the winner of the Service Dog category in the 2024 AKC Humane Fund Awards for Canine Excellence, which was televised on ESPN2 in December to honor canine heroes.

"Service dogs play such an important role in the lives of their owners. Kissable Katie is a prime example of how they can open up a world of possibilities for their owners," says Brandi Hunter Munden, AKC Vice President of Public Relations and Communications. "And she happens to be a really good girl! We are happy to honor her and all that she brings to her owner's life."

Dempsey is thrilled that her regal sidekick won a prestigious award, and that the AKC donated \$1,000 in honor of Kissable Katie to Freedom Guide Dogs. She rewarded Katie with her favorite treats: a hefty soup bone from the butcher shop, and sweet potatoes wrapped in duck jerky.

At age 15, Kissable Katie is enjoying retirement after training Dempsey's current guide dog, Sir Enoch. She helped



"Katie is so good with other people," says Jill Dempsey. "People are drawn to her automatically."

him learn guiding skills and how to pick his toys up off the floor to eliminate tripping hazards.

Dempsey, 58, hopes the way Kissable Katie transformed her life inspires others to consider partnering with a service dog, and for breeders to consider donating a puppy to a service dog organization.

"I went from not leaving the house to now I'm never home," she says. "Katie was the bridge. It's because of Katie that all of this became possible." **FD**

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is the 2025 Hall of Fame inductee of the Dog Writers Association of America.

For more information, visit freedomguidedogs.com and read more about the [AKC Humane Fund Awards for Canine Excellence](#).