

Debra O'Connor: Amazing Advocate



We think Debra O'Connor, [Pioneer Press Watchdog](#), is a hero. Two years ago, thanks to her willingness to advocate for Mark Grewing, dozens of volunteers and Pioneer Press readers came to the aid of Grewing, a White Bear Lake man whose service dog had been taken away.

Today, Mark Grewing and his new companion dog, Bailey, are a tightly bonded team.

A Minnesota man who lost both legs to diabetes, Grewing's service dog was taken away because the dog was slightly overweight. According to the St. Paul Pioneer Press, a staff member of Hearing and Service Dogs of Minnesota went to Grewing's home one day to pick up Ozzie for a weight check at a vet's office two blocks away.

Grewing waited outside in his wheelchair for an hour and then called the agency to find out what was going on. Executive director Al Peters told him that the yellow Labrador had been taken from him permanently – but wouldn't give a reason.

State Rep. Doug Meslow, an attorney, offered to represent Grewing at no cost but couldn't get an answer, either. Finally, O'Connor got involved and learned that Ozzie had been taken away because Peters believed he had been overfed. How overweight was the 69-pound dog? "A couple pounds," said Peters.



Working with Meslow, Karen Shirk of 4 Paws for Ability, waived the normal training fees and offered a Golden Retriever, Bailey, if Grewing could come to Xenia, Ohio for the required certification training. The answer was "Yes!"

In November 2009, O'Connor contacted Shirk to verify recertification for Grewing and to report on Bailey and Grewing: "Bailey (and you and your fine organization, by extension) has saved Mark's life. She gives him a reason to live. He is every bit as excited about having her today as he was when he got her, nearly two years ago"

"I would like to describe how much back-up I had that enabled me to be a 'hero,'" says O'Connor. "I could never have arranged for Mark to take advantage of the incredibly generous 4 Paws offer without Northwest Airlines donation of tickets, thanks to a contact of (now) District Court Judge Doug Meslow, the Xenia Holiday Inn donating rooms, Pioneer Press readers sending in money, and on and on. It was thrilling for all of us involved."