

"Before he realized his job was to keep me from falling, when I fell, he thought it was his fault," said Tyler, "so he thought he would be corrected. It took about three minutes for each fall for him to finally get it." Service dog trainers teach you to train the dogs with new commands tailored to your lifestyle.

Tyler gives Danny regular allergy shots. "He's allergic to all the different kinds of Florida grasses, dust mites and a rare fungus. I feed him NutraMax with glucosamine, take him out every two hours and he poops and pees on command. We play two or three times a day. When I get on all fours, he knows we're in play mode and he runs for me and knocks me over on purpose."

Tyler has had 15 surgeries since birth. After a surgery last year, a doctor told him not to do the stairs, but he doesn't really listen to doctors. He listens to God. And puts a lot of faith in Danny. He said Danny knew that he wasn't ready to take the stairs after this last surgery. "Danny knew the knee needed rest, so he would come up under my leg and lift it to let me rest my knee on his back," added Tyler.

About a month after the surgery, Danny seemed to know Tyler was ready. For the first time since the surgery, when Tyler said "Ok let's go," Danny jumped up, took off for the door, and then helped Tyler do something he could not do before: Descend the stairs. Going down the stairs had been Tyler's biggest fear. Recently at a movie theatre, he started to fall, but was able to put his entire weight on Danny. He clipped a seat but was able to leave the theatre under his own, and Danny's power. "He is completely selfless," says Tyler. "I take him to the Shriners Children's Center as a therapy dog on a regular basis."

"Danny provides a versatility that a cane can't," Tyler says. "All I have to do is hold on to the harness. It's amazing how he stands there to brace and stabilize me. I haven't fallen and broken a bone since Danny, and before that, I fell four to six times a day. He has given me my independence and I still find myself so shocked and appreciative that I have him. If I fall in the apartment when he's not in the harness, he will actually come under my arm and help me get up. We have such a bond that we can feel what's going on each other's bodies. Like the time he hurt his tailbone last year. And I could tell by the way he corrected me that he wasn't just right. No one else noticed it."

Tyler has been going to USF for three years. Sadly, for the first couple of years, other students made fun of him. "I used to get made fun of a lot more on this campus than I ever did in high school," he says.

"I was getting meaner and meaner and more reclusive. I would never even entertain a question about the dog. One day I was on my Segway and a red SUV started tailing me, making me madder by the minute. It pulled up along side of me and the window rolled down. It turned out to be reporter for the St. Pete. Times, making me realize how bad my attitude was, because I let a few ignorant people get to me. It was at that moment I realized that I was back."

Tyler is now chairman of alumni relations for the Guide Dog Foundation. "I know a lot," he says, "but I still am shocked by what these dogs can do. I connect with the new consumer to help them learn when to take their dogs to a vet and when to talk with your trainer. And we cover the Do's and Don'ts of owning a guide dog, like picking up after your dog. How to respond to ignorance. Remembering to always carry your ID."

Tyler and Mike Sergeant are developing new harnesses for guide dogs. "The foundation has started VetDogs because of what Danny does for me, to specifically help injured war veterans. We are working on harnesses to accommodate their specific handicap needs. We are always trying to improve the health and

well-being of the dog as well," says Tyler. Three graduate engineering students are helping develop the new harnesses with the blessing of USF president Judy Genshaft.

Tyler believes you only handicap yourself by choice. He says "ten percent of life is what happens to you. The rest is how you react to it. I plan to go to Medical School and specialize in pediatric orthopedics. I go to the pediatric ward on Wednesdays and Fridays to play with the babies."

"Life does not end when you have a disability or when something happens to you," he said. "Everybody is handicapped in some way. Some people's handicaps you just can't see. I would not trade cerebral palsy for anything in the world. If it weren't for CP, I wouldn't know Danny; I wouldn't be a motivational speaker. I speak about overcoming adversity and counting your blessings. I mentor kids with disabilities. The best thing you can do with these kids is be a best buddy. Let them define their disability. People should remember, we have the same hopes and dreams as everyone else."

Tyler wants people to remember that not every guide dog or service dog has a vest, and that you don't have to be blind to have a service dog.

He will graduate in May with a GPA of 3.6. He has applied to Penn State and FSU medical schools, and a D.O. school in South Florida. A man with purpose, a vision, and a heart bigger than life itself. He may not need us, but we sure need him. ❁

Everybody is handicapped
in some way.

We just can't see
everyone's handicaps.

—Tyler Sexton

TYLER, DANNY & A SEGWAY. ROCKIN' & ROLLIN' TO THEIR OWN TUNE.



Pain, frustration, anger and redemption. Who among us hasn't experienced a little, or perhaps a lot, of each? But if you want a yardstick by which to measure adversity, and a benchmark of how to overcome it, Tyler Sexton is a contender for top dog in that category.

You see, Tyler, 21, was born with cerebral palsy. He was never supposed to walk, much less become a motivational speaker, go to college, get around campus on a Segway, become a certified scuba diver, and a folk hero to any who has known him for more than five minutes. To Tyler, adversity is just a test, one he is acing, by the way.

His faithful Lab/Golden mix, **Danny**, who was five in March, came into Tyler's life following a chance encounter with a man walking a small puppy in the Denver airport. Unbelievably, the man was with the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind in Smithtown, N.Y. "I told him I was on a waiting list to get a service dog from another foundation, so he put me in touch with his CEO and a few months later, I had Danny," says a grateful Tyler.

The Segway Human Transporter he and Danny use to navigate USF's sizeable campus, was inspired by a high school field trip visit to Epcot where he saw it demonstrated. Tyler, whose biggest problem is maintaining balance from the waist down, saw it as a way to increase his mobility, which he would need to navigate a college campus. It moves when you lean forward and stops as you stand up straight. He and Danny, believed to be the first Segway/service dog team in the country,

have been crisscrossing the USF Campus with it since 2004.

Mike Sergeant, director of field operations and program services for the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind, lives in Sarasota and trained Tyler and Danny. Danny had to be trained specifically for Tyler's balance problems: To help him get out of bed and out of chairs and to keep him from falling. The dog helps him navigate safely in everyday life, something most of us take for granted. "Mike and I became best friends during training," says Tyler. "It still took Danny and me a month after training to become a well-oiled machine, though."

continued on page 58