

LIFESTYLE

Service dog working to help autistic youth

Encinitas veterinary hospital teams with Fallbrook, Oceanside centers to train golden retriever

By [Kristina Houck](#) 6 A.M. AUG. 29, 2014

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Drake helps make a student feel comfortable at the Comprehensive Autism Center.

After almost a year of fundraising and training, a golden retriever named Drake recently began her career as a service dog for local children with autism.

With the help of her namesake, Encinitas-based animal hospital The Drake Center for Veterinary Care and its clients, Drake was trained so she could help children at the Comprehensive Autism Center in Oceanside. She arrived Aug. 12 in San Diego during International Assistance Dog Week, officially beginning her new job six days later.

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“Most companion dogs are for one child, but Drake is going to help a lot of children,” said Michele Drake, owner of The Drake Center. “We’re really happy to be behind that.”

From a garage sale to a T-shirt sale, The Drake Center raised more than \$10,000 for the 12-month-old dog’s training through a variety of fundraisers. Drake became the first of her kind at Good Dog! Autism Companions, a Fallbrook-based nonprofit that specializes in training personal service dogs for children with autism and their families.

“We wanted to involve our whole practice,” said hospital manager Christine Spencer. “We had a lot of clients who jumped on board and supported us along the way.”

Though Drake is owned by The Drake Center, she will live and work with Comprehensive Autism Center regional director Susie Jordan and her family. Jordan will be responsible for Drake’s overall care, while The Drake Center will provide all veterinary care for free.

As a service dog, Drake will help increase motivation, promote gross and fine motor activities, provide opportunities for language, and calm and comfort children with autism spectrum disorders.

“It’s a beautiful thing when a dog can help bridge the communication issues autistic children experience,” Drake said. “I’ve been attached to animals my whole life. They’ve certainly played a huge role in my own personal growth, development, relationship-building and trust.

“Animals are so important for kids in growing up, and certainly, this very special group of kids really benefits from them. Our practice, and all the doctors here, feels this is a great thing that’s going to benefit many kids.”

For more about The Drake Center, visit www.thedrakecenter.com.

For more about Comprehensive Autism Center, visit www.comprehensiveautismcenter.com.

For more about Good Dog! Autism Companions, visit www.gooddogautismcompanions.org.

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