

All About Oliver and Ethan
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Thank you for the chance to tell you a little bit about Ethan and Oliver.

Oliver is 13 years old. He's in grade 7 at Birchwood Intermediate School. He's funny and creative and he likes computers, playing Minecraft, watching videos online. His favourite food is sushi.

In other words, he's a pretty typical 13 year old Islander. Except, maybe, for the sushi part.

But something that's not typical about Oliver is that he has an "autism spectrum disorder."

Which is term that means many different things to many different people: it's both a mouthful to say, and, because it's about a "spectrum," it's more about a "collection of things that may or may not be true" than a specific thing.

Oliver and I were talking about autism this morning in the car and we agreed that, whatever it is, autism is something that you *are* not something that you *have*.

So in addition to being funny and creative and liking computers and playing Minecraft and liking sushi, there are some other aspects of Oliver that aren't so typical.

Like, sometimes he has "meltdowns," episodes that look a lot like temper tantrums, but which are, in truth, a kind of reaction to overstimulation and sensory overload. Imagine, for example, a stressful situation you might find yourself in, a situation that takes you to the edges of your emotional limits. Now imagine what might happen if that was twice as stressful, and if that stress caused you to sort of shut down – "melt down" – in a way over which you have no control, and in a way that sort of freaks everyone out, yourself included.

Having a meltdown from time to time is just part of Oliver's being on the autism spectrum. It doesn't happen every day, or even every week. But when it happens it can be a big deal, especially if Oliver is with people who don't know how to help him through it (which is, in general, to just get him to a safe place, and to let him chill out, and not to try and rationally talk him through it, because there's nothing rational about meltdowns and when you're inside one, Oliver tells me, no amount of sense makes sense).

Meltdowns are one example of an aspect of Oliver's autism that, more generally, means that living in the world can be a more stressful experience for him than for typical people.

Another aspect of Oliver's autism is that it's harder for him to make friends and personal connections with people. That doesn't mean that he *can't* make connections with people, it's just more challenging, and Oliver tends to understand and make connections to adults more easily than to other kids.

Those two aspects of Oliver, along with some challenges with some aspects of learning, like math, which can be extra-tricky for him, can make going to school something that's even more of a challenge for Oliver than for a typical 13 year old.

Science understands a lot more about autism today than it once did, and Island society is more accommodating of all sorts of atypical people than it once was. Oliver has help, for example, from educational assistants in school, and help from an after-school worker who can do 1-on-1 tutoring with him and just hang out.

Wouldn't it be great if there was something we could introduce into Oliver's life that would help him deal with some of these challenges. Not a cure or a drug or a therapy, just something that could help dial down the stress, provide a sort of "emotional rock" for him, and just make getting through the day in a slightly-less-stressful way possible.

Fortunately, there is something, and this is where you folks come in.

Since March, Oliver has had Ethan in his life.

Ethan is a 14 month old standard poodle. He was born in Ontario and has lived with our family since March. He likes tennis balls, he doesn't like the rain, and if he's allowed, he'll hop up on the couch and lay on top of you.

In other words, Ethan is a pretty typical 14 month old Island dog.

But Ethan is so much more than that.

Ethan is a specially-trained Autism Assistance Dog from Lions Foundation of Canada's Dog Guides program.

This means that not only is Ethan the best-behaved dog you'll ever meet, but he's a dog that's been born and raised and specially selected to be the perfect dog to be a helper for Oliver.

About two years ago Catherine started to think that a service dog might be helpful for Oliver. It took some selling to get me on board – I hadn't had a dog for 20 years, and all I could think of was how much of a disruption to our daily routine a dog would bring. But Catherine is a good salesperson, and the more I learned the more it seemed like, disruption to routine or not, a dog could be a big help to Oliver.

And so last May we sent in our application to Dog Guides in Oakville. We needed letters of support from educators and doctors, information about Oliver's personality and his daily life – how does he get to school? do we have a fenced-in yard? and so on. We packed it all up and sent it off to Oakville.

And then we waited.

A few months later we heard that we'd be receiving a home visit from a trainer to meet us, learn more about Oliver and his needs and about Catherine and I, and last November Alissa flew to the Island and we spent a couple of hours with her, us learning more about Dog Guides and her learning more about us.

Alissa then took all that she learned back to Oakville for a decision and in January we received word that we'd been approved, and word that we'd be expected in late March at the Dog Guides training centre in Oakville for 10 days of training.

We worked out the logistics of that – we decided that Catherine would go for the full 10 days and I would go for the first 4 days and take the rest of the time to give Oliver the March Break vacation that he'd otherwise miss.

And so that's how we found ourselves in Oakville in March in the middle of a blizzard making our way to the Dog Guides training centre downtown.

Now in other Dog Guides programs – canine vision, hearing ear, and so on – it's the dog's client themselves who go for training, as they'll be the dog's handler.

In the case of the Autism Assistance Dog program, it works a little differently, as Catherine and I are Ethan's handlers and so although Oliver is the most important person in Ethan's life, Catherine and I are responsible for his day-to-day care and feeding and training, and so it's us that needed the training, not Oliver.

And so while Oliver was off at his grandparents eating sushi, we joined 7 other families from across Canada for the training in Oakville.

What an amazing facility that is: literally everything is taken care of. There's housing on site, a cafeteria, classrooms, dog kennels, and a complicated-looking "relief area" that you can only understand when you realize there can be dozens of dogs whose relief needs managing.

Our training was a combination of learning about dogs as any new dog owner would: grooming, behaviour, feeding, sleeping. But of course layered on top of that was everything to do with Ethan's super-powers as a service dog: learning how to walk with him, everywhere we go, in public (lots of visits to the Tim Hortons down the street), how to navigate escalators and elevators and shopping malls. Learning how to explain to other people that they can't pet Ethan because he's at work. Learning how to leave room for a bond between Ethan and Oliver to develop.

When we first learned that there were 10 days of training we wondered what on earth would require 10 days to accomplish, but once we were into the thick of it we realized that it was a miracle that it could all be accomplished in 10 short days.

We arrived in Oakville on a Wednesday afternoon and the most frustrating part of the whole experience was that we didn't get to meet our dogs – or even to learn their names – until Friday morning.

What we didn't know at the time but what the trainers knew very well is that once the dogs were on the scene things would get way more complicated, and so that first day and half where they had 100% of our attention, with no distracting dogs, was used to deliver a lot of important information.

And then we met Ethan.

We were all sent up to our rooms to wait and then, one by one, we heard knocks on the doors as Alissa and Tara, our trainers, brought each dog to meet its new handler.

Finally there was a knock on our door, it opened, and there before us was a beautiful cream-coloured standard poodle named Ethan.

After 5 minutes with him we realized that he was going to be the perfect dog for Oliver.

And from that point on, Ethan lived with us – went everywhere we went – for the rest of our time in Oakville and, indeed, ever since.

We were fortunate that, because Oliver was handy by in Burlington at the end of March Break, he could come, along with his grandparents and my brother and sister in law, to Ethan's "graduation."

And so 10 days after we arrived, Oliver got to meet Ethan too. We've got a picture of that moment, and, if we had any doubts at all, you can see in that picture that they were made for each other.

We also all got to meet the wonderful foster family who cared for Ethan when he was very young. Ethan was their 14th foster dog, if you can believe it, and they were a very nice, loving older couple from Etobicoke. Raising 14 pups only to have to let them go can take its toll on you, and we owe a great debt of gratitude to them for their service.

Oliver and I headed back to the Island, and Catherine and Ethan followed on the next day. And he's been a member of our family ever since.

So, how's it going?

One of the things we learned in our training was that it takes time for a bond to develop between dog and child: they need to get to know each other, and to trust each other, and to learn each other's habits.

So we're patient, and we're giving them the time to get to know each other.

Which isn't to say that having Ethan hasn't provided some immediate huge benefits to Oliver's life.

From the very first night here in Charlottetown, Ethan's slept in Oliver's bed right beside him. And the result was immediate and dramatic: for the last several years Oliver's had problems sleeping through the night. He would wake up, get scared, come looking for us, and then we'd wake up and, well, you get the picture.

That doesn't happen any more: having Ethan at his side in bed gives Oliver just enough extra comfort so that if he does wake up Ethan's there to ease his worries and he can generally get back to sleep all by himself.

It's really rather amazing.

The plan is that Ethan will go to school with Oliver sometime in the next 3 to 9 months: Alissa or Tara will come out in July to gauge how things are going, and when it appears the time is right, and that Oliver and Ethan's bond is solidified enough to make it work, they'll come back again and they'll work with the school, Oliver's educational assistants and even hold an assembly for the entire student body so that everyone understands Ethan's role in Oliver's life, and learns why Ethan, unfortunately, can't be a part of *their* lives too. Ethan's a pretty adorable dog, so we imagine that's going to be a challenge.

Meanwhile, Ethan and Oliver and I walk to school every morning, then Ethan comes to work with me for the morning, to work with Catherine for the afternoon, and then Catherine picks up Oliver with Ethan when school is over. So Ethan's getting used to us, getting used to his new neighbourhood, and Ethan and Oliver are getting used to each other's routine.

When Ethan is outside of our house he's always "on the job" and so he wears his official red vest, the one that says "DO NOT PET" on the back.

As you can imagine, this means that, walking around town, Catherine and I spend a lot more time that we imagined simply talking about dog guides and autism.

And that too is part of the role of Ethan in Oliver's life: he can be an icebreaker, a way of starting a conversation with Oliver – "what's your dog's name?" "what kind of dog is he?" "can I pet him?" – that can be an excellent way of allowing Oliver to be just a little more social.

When we're talking to people about why they can't pet Ethan, this is what I usually say: imagine if you were walking down the street and someone asked to borrow your eyeglasses. Okay, you think, just this once. And then, a few steps later, someone else asked to borrow them. And then someone else. Pretty soon your eyeglasses wouldn't be any good to you because other people would be wearing them more than you would.

It's the same thing with Ethan: Ethan's greatest gift to Oliver his *attention*. Oliver needs to be the most important human in Ethan's life, to the point where, in truth, most other humans should be somewhere in the distant background.

But if Ethan and Oliver are walking down the street and this person's petting Ethan, and this person's giving him a dog treat and that person's scratching his ears, then Ethan's attention is being drained away, Oliver isn't the most important part of his life, and Ethan's effectiveness in Oliver's life is diminished.

So as much as it's difficult to say "no, I'm sorry, but Ethan's at work right now," we need to be consistent and universal, even if it sounds, to the recipient, like "no, you can't pet my absolutely adorable dog."

We've been pleasantly surprised with how well Islander's have respected this, and have also respected Oliver's right to bring Ethan with him everywhere we go: in restaurants, to the farmer's market, to the doctor's office. There have been a couple of times when we've been told dog's aren't allowed, but when we explain that Ethan's a service dog, everyone understands.

When Ethan's at home with us he's still on the job, of course, supporting Oliver, but his vest comes off and he's allowed to run around and fetch tennis balls and chew on bones and do all the things that typical dogs do.

Before I finish I have to tell you just how much gratitude we feel toward Lions Clubs for your support of the Dog Guides program.

Although I'm not sure words can do it justice.

We literally have nothing but good things to say about the experience of bringing Ethan into our family, from the initial application to Ethan's arrival in our house, we've been dealing with caring, professional, dedicated people at Dog Guides Canada. These are people who understand the tremendous power of service dogs, and the importance of training and support.

It has been a joy to work with them.

That Lions Foundation of Canada can support the Autism Assistance Dog program at no charge to families is an indescribable gift.

It would be something beyond the reach of any family to accomplish on our own, especially when you take into account the added complexities of helping our children thrive with their added challenges.

When you're walking around the Oakville training facility it's hard not to notice the tremendous generosity of Lions Clubs from coast to coast to coast around every corner: your contributions are recognized and valued.

No more so than by our family.

So, thank you.

Thank you for your invitation tonight.

Thank you for your support of Dog Guides Canada.

And thank you, from the bottom of our hearts, for being part of the program that allowed Ethan to come into our lives.