Aurora youth recognized for outstanding volunteer efforts

By Brittany Spencer

The province of Ontario has recognized Brooke Nishio, a 2014 graduate from Aurora High School, for her dedicated years of volunteer service with the community-based organization COPE Service Dogs.

Brooke received a certificate of achievement this spring at the 2014 Ontario Volunteer Service Awards Ceremony in Barrie, where she was recognized along-side other COPE volunteers and organizers for their exceptional service to the community.

COPE Service Dogs is an organization of volunteers and professionals committed to a mission ?to provide a remarkable education program that engages communities and empowers students and others in the training of service dogs that will transform the lives of people with disabilities.?

Brooke became involved with the organization during her Grade 9 year, when she attended a COPE training seminar and became fascinated by the programs it had to offer. Since then, she has been a committed participant and trainer, becoming the COPE Ambassador for York Region as well as the youngest trainer in the organization's puppy-raiser program.

Puppy raising with COPE involves the pairing of a Golden Retriever puppy with a trainer who acts as a temporary owner and works with the animal outside of their formal classrooms, training them in the skills necessary to assist their future life-partner.
It was through this program that Brooke met Vasco, a unique and exceptional service dog within COPE's initiative.

Vasco is a Barbet French Water Dog, and the first and only service dog of his breed in Canada. He was donated to COPE by local breeder Paula Ballack, who believed that the breed's intelligence and kind nature were perfectly suited for COPE's services.

Since his pairing with Brooke, Vasco has exceeded all expectations, completing his two-year training program in only six months. His success with Brooke's training has led COPE to recruit more of the breed into their programs.

Together, Brooke and Vasco travel York Region showcasing their training through demos at various events including last year's annual COPE Fundraising Gala.

?A lot of people really love Vasco,? Brooke said, ?because he is so good and so advanced, but also because he's different. It's really nice seeing a new breed do all of the commands the Golden Retriever can do, and do them so well.?

Brooke's outstanding achievements with COPE have had a lasting impact on her. She says she will carry her experience with her to Conestoga College this September as she pursues a diploma in the Social Service Worker Program.

Commenting on her future goals, Brooke claims ?in whatever I'm doing within the social humanities, I would like to have a service or therapy animal in my practice so I can always use them as a tool to reach out and help people.?

In addition to these goals, Brooke has initiated a project aimed at improving the existing legislation surrounding service dogs and their trainers in Ontario. Beginning research in 2013, Brooke says, ?in Ontario, legislation doesn't make specific reference to us trainers ? only people in need of service dog assistance. As an organization, if we don't know what our rights are, concerning something like access to public spaces with a service dog, it can lead to challenges with training.?

Brooke has begun discussions with former MPP Frank Klees, as well as incumbent MPP Chris Ballard with the goal of eventually expanding legislation to include service dog trainers, allowing them ?the same rights to access public spaces with their service dogs as life partners enjoy.?
She says she believes such inclusion will improve service dog training as well as COPE programs overall.

Brooke describes receiving her award as a big, and happy, surprise, saying ?it was really nice to be recognized, and to be recognized with all the other people that are doing such a good job ? puppy raisers, trainers, and students. It was really nice to see all the different parts of the program come together to recognize each other's hard work.?