



Assistance dog, 12-year-old make 'Marvelous' pair



Photos by Joe Brier for USA TODAY

Shea Megale wrote six kids' books about her dog, Mercer, doing things she can't do from her wheelchair.

By Brittany Levine, USA TODAY

The next premier offering at FAO Schwarz isn't a robot with fancy gadgets or a jumbo giraffe. It's a book with no wizards, no princesses — just Shea Megale and her assistance dog, the stars of *Marvelous Mercer*.

Shea, a happy-go-lucky 12-year-old from Centreville, Va., has a rare form of muscular atrophy, a terminal illness that limits her mobility and forces her to buzz around in a wheelchair with Billy Bob the teddy bear strapped to the back and Mercer, a 5-year-old retriever mix, at her side.

Ever since 2004, when Mercer became Shea's assistance dog, they have been inseparable. At the mall, Mercer carries Shea's purse and will hand the clerk a credit card using his mouth and paws. At school, Mercer lies beneath Shea's desk, and when she drops a pencil, he gets it. They watch movies together, each with individual bowls of popcorn. When Shea goes to the doctor's office, he keeps her calm. If she's sick, Mercer won't leave her side.

Last Thanksgiving, while cleaning out her daughter's closet, Shea's mother, Megan, found six stories Shea had written about Mercer.

Over the past few months, the stories have become a six-book children's series. The first book will be sold exclusively at FAO Schwarz's New York store this month. It will also be available at shop.marvelousmercer.com and the websites for FAO Schwarz, Barnes and Noble and Amazon.

In the stories, Mercer sneaks out at night and does things Shea can't do. In the first one, he ice-skates; in the second, he sleds; and in the third, he tries to become an Olympic swimmer. The last three plots are secret — but in each story, Mercer brainstorms how he can help Shea do the activities.

"I started to realize they were about Mercer doing these things that Shea will never, ever be able to feel or encounter," Megan Megale says. "Through the book and Mercer, she experiences things she has never been able to."

Megan enlisted her brother-in-law, Curt Wagner, who is a designer for the clothing firm Nautica, to do the illustrations, and Shea's mentor and school librarian, Catherine Conley, to be an editor. She then self-published the book and entered FAO Schwarz's July toy audition. The auditions take place four times a year and are an opportunity for toymakers to present their creations to David Niggli, FAO Schwarz's president, and to merchant buyers. The winning products are sold through the FAO Schwarz stores, catalog and website. *Marvelous Mercer* won the July audition with an immediate acceptance from Niggli.

On Saturday, Shea and Mercer, whom Shea calls her best friend and her puzzle piece, because he completes her, will sign copies of the book at the New York store. Each book will come with a plush toy version of Mercer, Shea's autograph and Mercer's paw print.

A majority of the book's proceeds will go to Canine Companions for Independence, based in Santa Rosa, Calif. The organization, where Mercer came from, plans to use its share of the money to give assistance dogs to Iraq veterans from Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Some proceeds will go to the Spinal Muscular Atrophy Foundation, based in New York City, and Families of Spinal Muscular Atrophy, based in Libertyville, Ill., for research. A portion will also go to pay for Shea's medical needs.

"With the money we raise from this book, we can pop out 60 new assistance dogs a year. That may not seem like a lot, but that's 60 lives that would be made better," Megan Megale says. It costs about \$45,000 to raise one assistance dog. That means book sales and donations would need to reach up to \$2.7 million for 60 dogs, but Megan says she has her fingers crossed.

Shea says it gives her a "warm feeling" when she thinks about all the people her books will help. She hopes it will help spread awareness of her disease.

"I have no problem telling people why I'm in a wheelchair. I just don't like it when people stare," Shea says. "It's like they say: You can't judge a book by its cover."

When Shea, who is a seventh-grader at her local public school, isn't promoting her book series or writing on her blog on the book's website, she loves to watch football (her favorite team is the New York Giants), shop at the mall and study history.

This fall, Shea plans to be making rounds on TV talk shows to promote the series. The second book is scheduled for release by Valentine's Day.