

Shea Assists Two Charities

Proceeds go to SMA research, assistance dogs.

By Bonnie Hobbs, Centreview

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At the moment, Centreville's Shea Megale, 13, is recuperating at home from major surgery. But before going to the hospital, she participated in fund-raising campaigns that raised money for two charities and matched a disabled soldier with a companion dog.



Shea is a media star at a Build-A-Bear workshop in New York.

"I think that's pretty awesome," said her mother, Megan Megale of Virginia Run. "Her efforts changed the lives of so many others."

An eighth-grader at Stone Middle School, Shea has spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), a rare and incurable form of muscular dystrophy.

Although wheelchair-bound, this exuberant girl doesn't let her condition stop her. With the support of her family and community, she maintains a positive attitude. But the one who always puts a smile on her face is her trusty, companion dog, a Black Labrador named Mercer. He does small, but important, tasks for her and is her best buddy.

Shea's even written children's books about their adventures together and, this summer, their relationship paid off on the national level. First came a project with a St. Louis-based company catering to children.

"We did a partnership with Build-A-Bear," said her mom. "In honor of Mercer, they created a toy, Black Labrador animal that people could buy and stuff and dress with an assistance-dog vest. Then from the end of June to the end of July, for every dog that was sold, they donated \$2 to SMA and Canine Companions for Independence [CCI]."

Based in Santa Rosa, Calif., CCI trains and raises assistance dogs for people with disabilities and is the organization that raised Mercer. In one month, said Megale, the campaign raised \$91,165. As a result, \$62,521 was donated to CCI and \$28,644 went to SMA research toward finding a cure.

"A gentleman who lives in Manhattan underwrote this partnership," said Megale. "He heard Shea speak, two years ago, at a black-tie event on Wall Street. She talked about what Mercer meant to her, and he was taken by Shea and approached her afterward."

The man, who doesn't want to be identified, is CEO of a large advertising agency in New York. And through his efforts, 300 posters advertising the Build-A-Bear fund-raiser were hung in the New York subways and on every Amtrak stop between Washington, D.C., and Boston.

They were also placed on the backs of buses in Northern Virginia, Manhattan and Los Angeles. The posters showed Shea in her wheelchair and Mercer running next to her. The words read, "Build a dog, build a friendship."

In addition, the proceeds from Shea's books, called "Marvelous Mercer," also go to both SMA and CCI. Her next book, the third in a series of six, will come out in February 2009 and be launched at FAO Schwarz in New York.

Megale said the money raised for CCI goes to a program that provides assistance dogs for returning, U.S. military veterans who've lost limbs in Iraq. "Shea's really excited about that because, like her, these soldiers will have a best friend — a dog who can help them turn on lights, for example, and have a somewhat normal life," said Megale. "The fund-raising campaign was so important to her because she knows these kids are protecting us over there and keeping us safe."

One of them, a 23-year-old Army veteran from Colorado, has already benefited. He lost a leg in the war and, through CCI, he received an assistance dog of his own. A few weeks ago, he sent Shea a video expressing his gratitude — and it came at a time when she really needed some cheering up.

Because of her severe scoliosis, her parents knew that someday she'd have to undergo an operation to correct it as much as possible. Since

it's major surgery, they put it off as long as they could but, finally, Shea had the operation Aug. 4 in New York.

"It was 14 hours," said her mom. "The doctors had to break her back and put in rods to help her back remain as straight as possible. Her spine curvature was corrected from 85 degrees to 40 degrees and she's now 3 inches taller."

Shea was in the hospital for two weeks afterward and came home Aug. 17. But, said Megale, "She's having a hard and slow recovery and is in a lot of pain. So when the soldier's video arrived, Sept. 6, it meant a lot to her. It was just wonderful. He sent his thanks and well wishes and said she inspired him to get up and start moving."

Meanwhile, Shea is bedridden while she recuperates and probably won't be able to go to school until January. Anyone wishing to send her a get-well card may mail it to: Shea Megale, 15097 Wetherburn Drive, Centreville, VA 20120.



Shea and Mercer on a bus.

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