

Service Dog Sugar Graduates from a Lifetime Career of Help and Healing

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Psychology doctoral candidate Jill Ferrell with her service dog, Sugar.

Jill Ferrell has always had a special bond with dogs. By age eight, Ferrell was training the family's collie to perform an impressive repertoire of tricks. At eleven, she began training guide dogs for the blind, spending individual time with several different dogs throughout her adolescence and early adulthood. And now, as Jill finishes her doctorate degree in Combined Clinical/Counseling psychology, understanding the depth of human-animal bonds continues to be a vital part of both her career and her personal journey—at the center of which is Ferrell's own service dog, Sugar.

Spending a portion of her childhood in Fairview, Tennessee, Ferrell was impressed by the nurturing role of teachers in her community. She frequently interacted with her teachers outside of the classroom, and many of them had taught generations of residents in their small town. Wanting to emulate the connection and care she received from her teachers, Ferrell decided to work towards becoming one herself.

As she began to pursue an undergraduate degree in education at Brigham Young University, however, Ferrell began to realize that outside of her uniquely tight-knit community, teaching was not always so intimate and person-centered. After attending a class taught by a clinical psychologist at BYU, Ferrell realized that the field of psychology would allow her to build close connections and make a difference in people's lives in the way she desired, so Ferrell changed course to psychology and has never looked back.

"Every bit farther I get along the path, I think, 'Yep, this is what I wanted to do,'" said Ferrell. "I want to be close and connected; I want to really see people, and psychology can do that."

It was during her undergraduate years that Jill first met Sugar, an eight-month-old English cream golden retriever training to be a guide dog for the blind. Ferrell began part-time training with Sugar, but Sugar was eventually dropped from the guide dog program—though trainers typically prefer to call it a "career change."

"No dog fails, they just change careers," said Ferrell.

Still, Sugar loved working and had a strong basis of service training, so Ferrell took her career change in stride and began working with Sugar as a therapy dog. Together they visited hospitals and attended outreach events on BYU campus, where Sugar's soft fur and calm presence brought comfort to patients and students.

During this time, Ferrell was applying to graduate programs across the country, one of which was at Utah State University. Though Ferrell wasn't originally as interested in USU's program, she was contacted personally by USU Psychology professor Susan Crowley, who had seen Ferrell's history of working with dogs and personally invited her to come to USU to pursue research on the human-animal bond. Ferrell enthusiastically accepted.

As she was preparing for this next step in her education, Ferrell was also diagnosed with a heart condition, though she noticed that she had significantly fewer heart episodes when she was with Sugar. While trying to manage these life changes all at one, Sugar's owner gave Ferrell what she calls "the most generous gift" she could have ever received: Sugar moved to Logan with Ferrell to undergo one more career change—this time, to a full-time cardiac alert dog.



Ferrell and Sugar at graduate commencement with Ferrell's faculty advisor, Dr. Sue Crowley (right).

In her new capacity as Ferrell's dedicated service dog, Sugar attended every class with Ferrell through her master's program and then her doctorate degree at USU. She became something of a celebrity within the Psychology department and on campus, and she was able to put her therapy skills to work at de-stress events hosted at the library. Sugar and Ferrell also worked together at USU Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), where Sugar was able to connect with individual clients and groups in therapy sessions in ways Ferrell could not.

"I am trained in animal assisted therapy, where I work with dogs in very specific, deliberate, and intervention-based ways to augment therapy with clients who are able to really connect with animals or who are seeking therapy to cultivate skills that working with an animal requires, like assertiveness, confidence, or paying attention to social cues," said Ferrell. "Clients can sometimes accept treatment from a dog better than from me, but the dog becomes a bridge for clients to shift their relationships or improve skills internally and externally."

Ferrell is now completing an APA-accredited internship at BYU Counseling and Psychological Services to fulfill her final requirements before earning her PhD. Upon returning to Utah Valley, however, Ferrell began to notice that Sugar, now nearly 14, was starting to slow down and have more difficulty performing her service tasks. Despite still loving to work, Sugar wasn't able to see, hear, or move around well enough to do her job, and Ferrell realized that it might be time for Sugar to hang up her vest for good.

According to Ferrell, that was one of the hardest decisions for her to make. "It felt like such a shame that a lifetime of service would just fizzle out and nobody would know," she said. "Everybody knows Sugar, and I felt like she deserved to be recognized for it. Graduation felt like the threshold that we needed to make that transition with a little more closure."

This spring, when Ferrell walked for her own upcoming graduation, Sugar walked with her as a fellow graduate. She was presented with a rawhide scroll to commemorate her earning her "PoochD" and was hooded by Dr. Crowley to honor her years of service. "That's the happiest I've seen her in a long time," said Ferrell. "It was a really nice way to celebrate her and also help me make sense of the fact that she is retiring."

Sugar is now settling into her retirement by taking unlimited naps, going for short walks, and wrestling with 1-year-old Rivkah, Ferrell's new service dog in training. Upon completing her internship at BYU, Ferrell will return to Utah State in the fall to work at USU CAPS while

pursuing her licensure, where she hopes to continue her work with animal assisted therapy. "I'm so excited to return to work full-time at CAPS," Ferrell said. "They value the importance and impact of the human-animal bond in heartfelt and competent, research-based ways."

Though Sugar no longer joins Ferrell at work every day, Ferrell's office wall prominently features a colorful painting of Sugar in honor of the impact she has had and continues to have on Ferrell's community, work, and life. This portrait will accompany Ferrell as she continues her journey as a psychologist, a constant reminder of one of her most important supporters.