

# Halle and Soren's Story

My name is Cynthia. I am the mother of a college age student, Halle, who suffers from depression and anxiety (DA). I am writing to you in the hopes that you would consider making a donation to the non-profit organization, New Hope Assistance Dogs Inc. (NHADI), to help us raise money for the price of her service dog, Soren. But first, let me tell you about my beautiful daughter.

Halle was adopted from China in August of 1999 at the age of 11 months. We were smitten from the moment we saw her picture from our adoption agency. Shortly after she was placed in our arms, she was admitted to a Chinese hospital with the diagnosis of dysentery. For five days her fever raged and her symptoms continued as she received treatment through an IV in her head. She survived dysentery. We brought her home to PA and soon learned she lacked the ability to move her left leg. After numerous painful tests, she was diagnosed as having had polio at some point prior to her adoption. Her left quadriceps muscle bore the brunt of the nerve damage from the disease causing her to walk with a limp. But she survived polio. She ignored the teasing from peers when she wore an eye patch for nystagmus and for having shoes with chunky heels. She had surgery when she was 7 to correct the nystagmus and another surgery when she was 10 to interrupt the growth plates in her right leg in the hopes of decreasing the rapidly increasing leg length discrepancy. She began asking about her birth mother. Why didn't she want her? Did she still think about her? Did she remember her birthday? But she survived the teasing, the surgeries, and the nagging questions about her past. Then she entered middle school and had to face a whole new set of classmates who didn't know her history, her story. We suggested she meet their curious glances about her leg with honesty and "tell them your story." We suggested she get the obvious difference about her leg out in the open so others could see past that and get to know her for the beautiful individual she is. She made new friends. She went to football games. She hung out with people from orchestra. She got good grades. She smiled. We thought everything was going along well.

But, as is often the case with teenagers, she stopped sharing her innermost thoughts and fears with us. She started spending a great deal of time in her room and sleeping sometimes 16 hours a day. We thought it was typical teenage distancing. But one night, when she was a sophomore in high school, she woke me up in the middle of the night with the words, "Mama, I don't want to live anymore."

The next day I took her to the pediatrician. I made an appointment with a counselor. And I scheduled an appointment with a psychiatrist which would not take place for two months. I watched her like a hawk. She trialed various medicines, various therapists but said the darkness was always with her. Panic attacks ensued. My once confident and carefree girl was scared and filled with self-doubt. Then one day a new therapist she had been seeing suggested we consider a service dog for Halle. The service dog could assist with her physical needs as well as her DA. This is how we discovered New Hope Assistance Dogs.

New Hope is tucked away in the lush northwestern area of PA among the beautiful mountains surrounding Warren. This non-profit is run by Barb, Tammy, Tanya and Jackie who volunteer their time to provide service dogs for those who need physical and emotional assistance. Children, Veterans and adults have benefitted from their service dogs to address insulin and seizure disorders, mobility assistance, hearing deficits, and the emotional needs of individuals with autism, PTSD and DA. The monies received by NHADI is used to compensate the trainers and caretakers and for the day to day food and medical needs of the dogs. And this is where Soren's story begins.

Halle met Soren, a handsome nearly 3-year-old yellow lab, on July 26. He pranced into the office of New Hope where Halle was waiting to meet him, sitting cross legged on the floor.

Although there were five other people in the office that morning, Soren only had eyes for Halle. Barb Ruhlman, co-founder of New Hope and trainer, told us there's something special that occurs when a dog bonds with someone. And it was beyond magical to see the bond that was already forming between Halle and this dog. He leaned into her, providing her with the deep pressure needed when she feels anxious. He licked her face and climbed further into her lap, his eyes never leaving hers. When asked if she wanted to see the next dog, her answer was firm, "No, I want Soren."

The trainers proceeded to take Halle and Soren into the next room for training. They demonstrated the commands Soren had been trained in for physical and emotional needs and how to execute those commands in a firm voice. They took us to a restaurant and showed Halle what service dogs were expected to do in that type of setting. Then they sent us home with Soren for a week with an appointment to return for team training and his handler-service dog test.

Halle was taken with Soren and the feeling was mutual. He was so well trained and he loved her so much that he followed all of her commands as if his relationship with her depended on it. One week later, we were back in Warren. Soren's trainer, Cinda, welcomed her boy home

and put him and Halle through the paces of the assessment. Team Training was about to start. She took them in a shoe store, a grocery store, a restaurant, and around the town during a festival filled with distractions, just to name a few. The team of Halle and Soren passed everything with flying colors. I've never seen Halle so happy. But for Cinda, it was a difficult good bye. As she hugged him, I heard her whisper, "I told you you'd find your person. Take good care of her." And that he has.

Halle has changed in so many ways since August 4, 2018 when Soren officially became part of our family. She has a joy about her that I forgot she was capable of. She remains with the family throughout the day as opposed to retreating to her room. She has a typical sleep schedule again and ventures forth into the community without the trepidation evident in the past. Her panic attacks have been nonexistent since Soren joined her. At college she initiates interactions which she avoided in the past. Her confidence is returning. What Soren has done for my girl is priceless.

However, the cost of a service dog is no small fee. The \$15,500 for Soren is a price tag our family cannot afford on our own. New Hope operates on donations, grants, memorials, and business scholarships. I would ask that your organization consider making a charitable donation to the New Hope Assistance Dogs non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. The amazing, life changing services provided by these highly trained dogs are truly blessings for so many children, their parents, and adults with special needs. Donations cover the cost of raising the dogs including their kennel needs, medical services, transportation costs, and payments for the trainers and kennel workers.

Thank you for taking the time to read Halle's story. She is studying to become a Speech Language Pathologist. I pray that with Soren's support, she will continue on this positive trajectory to be a blessing to others throughout her lifetime.