

Taking a heartfelt stand, outside the box Boy raises \$20K for Canine Companions



By Patricia Proven

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Soon after Ocean Avenue School student Kyle Orent received the lemonade stand he wanted for his seventh birthday, he marked its chalkboard with the word "Charity" and brought the stand to garage sales, ball fields and pet stores around town dispensing "free lemonade" in the hope of raising interest and at least \$20,000 in donations for the cause that's closest to his heart, Canine Companions for Independence (CCI).

Over the past year or so, the Northport entrepreneur has also dictated letters for his mother to type and send to famous figures he admires, including John Glenn, George Clooney, Chris Rock — the latter two whom he met — and, of course,

Donald Trump, the man who inspired the "how-to" part of his venture.

Kathy Orent said her son had decided when he was about six years old to raise money for a local charity. Later on, in watching *The Apprentice*, the only show he was allowed to stay up late for, he took Trump's mantra of thinking outside the box to a whole new level in engaging people across the community and the nation in his goal.

"This is Kyle," said Kathy Orent, whose 13-year-old son, Ryan, has also aided the effort. "He wants to save the world. He likes to help make sure kids who need toys get new ones, not used, and thinks that every kid should have a great life."

When Kyle was researching nonprofit organizations to which he could donate, he visited the CCI, a nonprofit organization whose Northeast office is based in converted barn on the SUNY Farmingdale campus. The charity group enhances the lives of people with disabilities, excluding visual impairments, by providing highly-trained assistance dogs.

Once Kyle met the instructors and saw the dogs there, that was it — he committed to aiding CCI's goal of relocating to Medford, where a training center is under construction. "I love animals," Kyle said.

Having recently reached his goal, for which he was recently honored with a Town of Huntington proclamation, all Kyle's proceeds will go toward CCI's \$9-million capital construction project for the new facility.

At press time, Canine Companions had \$3.8 million left to raise, according to CCI's public relations coordinator, Dina Ghram.

The new facility will have 11 rooms for applicants selected for a two-week "team training." During the course, dogs are matched with disabled children and adults who hail from between Maine and Washington DC, and as far west as Pennsylvania. "Unfortunately we don't have any place to put them because we're on a college cam-

pus," said Ronald Knell, CCI's executive director for the region. Prospective graduates must pay for hotel stays and that cost can be prohibitive, according to Ghram. With a new center up and running, she said, applicants won't have to pay for anything, and will have the opportunity to meet and stay with other families.

The process starts in Santa Rosa, California, where volunteers breed Labradors, golden retrievers and mixes of the two for CCI. Once the puppies are born, they stay until they're six to 10 weeks old and then are shipped throughout the country. "We get them kind of sporadically," Ghram said. "Once the puppy comes to our region, it's about eight to 10 weeks old." Volunteers then raise the pups for another 16 months, teaching them basic obedience and socialization.

The dogs return to CCI for six to eight months of advanced training. Instructors will teach 50 commands that include retrieving and dropping items, turning light switches on and off, and transactions like reaching up to countertops, retrieving change and returning it to companions' laps.

After the basic training, dogs are matched with applicants. Once they've learned all the commands, the teams are tested and receive Assistance Dogs International identification cards. These guarantee them access to public places, like restaurants and malls, with their dogs.

What follows is a graduation typically held at Crest Hollow in Woodbury. During the ceremony, volunteer puppy raisers mark the "matriculation" of dogs ready for advanced training with a ceremonial "handing over of the leash," Ghram said. Others, "like proud parents," according to Knell, watch their dogs matched with people whose lives will be forever changed by having a companion to help with ordinary tasks.

During one graduation ceremony, Kyle Orent received a volunteer appreciation award and about two years ago embarked on his goal with an Our Hero award at CCI's annual fundraising dinner.

"We've never had anybody put together any kind of fundraiser like he has," Ghram said. "He's a good example. Adults could take some lessons from him. When you put your mind to something and you believe in something you can achieve it, and we are really honored that he chose us." Knell said, "I have never seen anything quite like it. He rallies, which is the neat thing about it. He's got a leadership quality that is really quite amazing. By his enthusiasm and by what he can do, other people get interested. It's hard to imagine that someone so young would have that concept." Through it all, Kyle remains humble; he continues to visit the office every so often and attends all the graduations; this year, there are four, with the next one planned for February 24.

"It changes people's lives," Knell said, of both the graduation ceremony and the service that CCI provides. "It's very exciting."

For Kyle, who has befriended many children through CCI and even named a dog after he raised \$5,000, it was the idea of helping someone else that kept him going with the lemonade stand, which he plans to continue.

"I felt happy every time I did it," Kyle said. "Even if I made like a dollar, at least I gave something."

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