

EDUCATION

Hestia the Service Dog

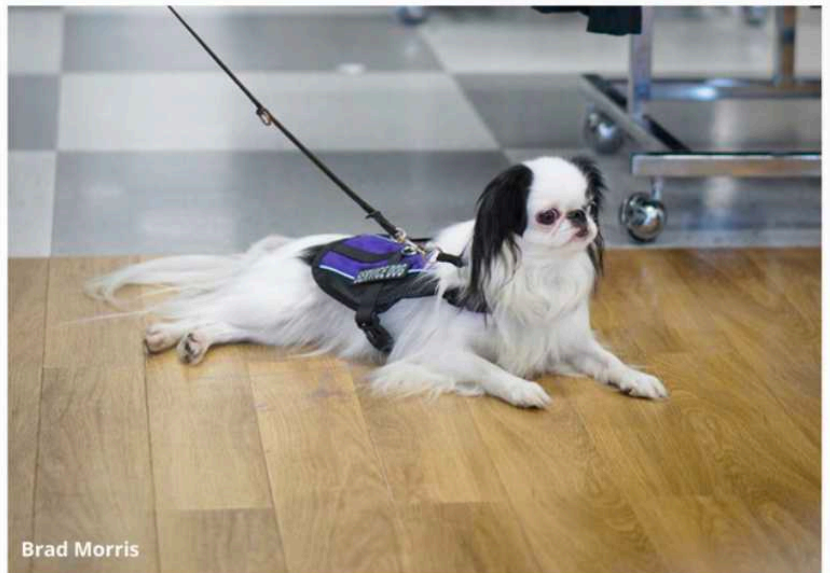
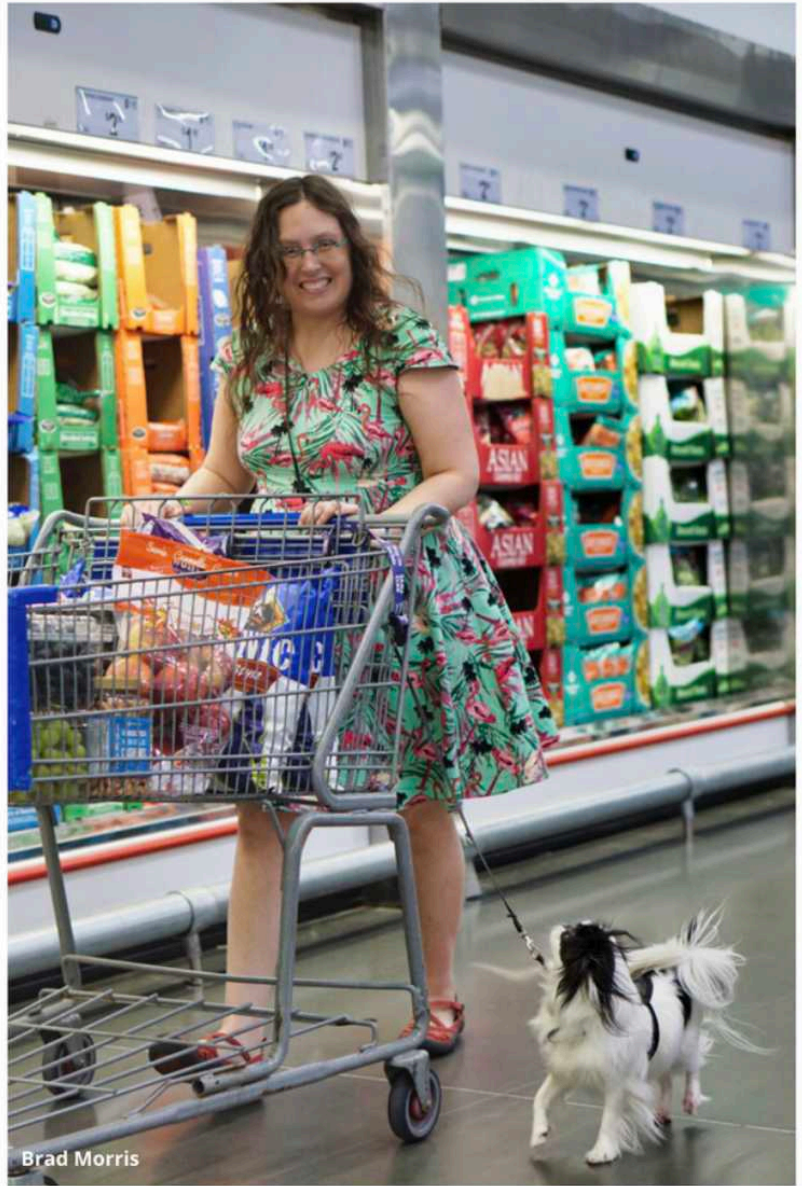
by Veronica Morris, PhD

I'm in the grocery store when it hits. Suddenly I'm struggling to make my lungs work, I can't catch my breath and my heart speeds. The aisles on either side of me feel like they're closing in. I start to shake and sweat, I feel like I'm going to die or throw up. The tears spring from my eyes as I feel ever more anxious. I'm having a panic attack.

I look down, and on the floor is a Japanese Chin, her googley eyes light and as always pointing in different directions, her mouth open in a smile, and her tongue slightly protruding. She knows what I'm experiencing isn't reality. As I pick her up and cradle her in my arms, she presses her legs against my arms to push her body deeply into my chest. This is something she's been trained to do. She is providing pressure therapy. Similar to a living weighted blanket, the pressure starts to calm me.

She licks my arm intently, providing a sensation outside of my messed up brain to focus on. As I've learned to do in therapy, I stroke the softest hair behind her ears and focus on that sensation, too—this is called grounding, or keeping yourself stable in place and time. I bring my head down to hers and smell her ears and feet, using that comforting scent to ground me more.

After several minutes, my heart begins to slow, my breathing returns to



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normal, and I'm able to laugh at the cute dog in my arms.

Hestia is my service dog. She is trained to do work or tasks to mitigate my disabling agoraphobia (fear of leaving the house), PTSD, and bipolar disorder, and is trained to behave appropriately in public.

People sometimes confuse her for a therapy dog, but really service dogs and therapy dogs are opposites. Therapy dogs bring joy to people in nursing homes and hospitals. They are trained to interact with people other than their handler who might not have disabilities. A service dog is trained to ignore everyone else, to do things to help with the handler's disability, and to behave in public. There's a third type of animal, too, an Emotional Support Animal (ESA). ESAs help a disabled handler just by being there, and are not trained to behave in public. Of these, only service dogs are allowed in no-pet places like grocery stores and restaurants.

I've been using service dogs since 2005. Before that, I was having seven to ten panic attacks a day. When I went to the grocery store, I held onto my husband's shirt, looked at the floor, and shuffled around unable to look at anything or anyone.

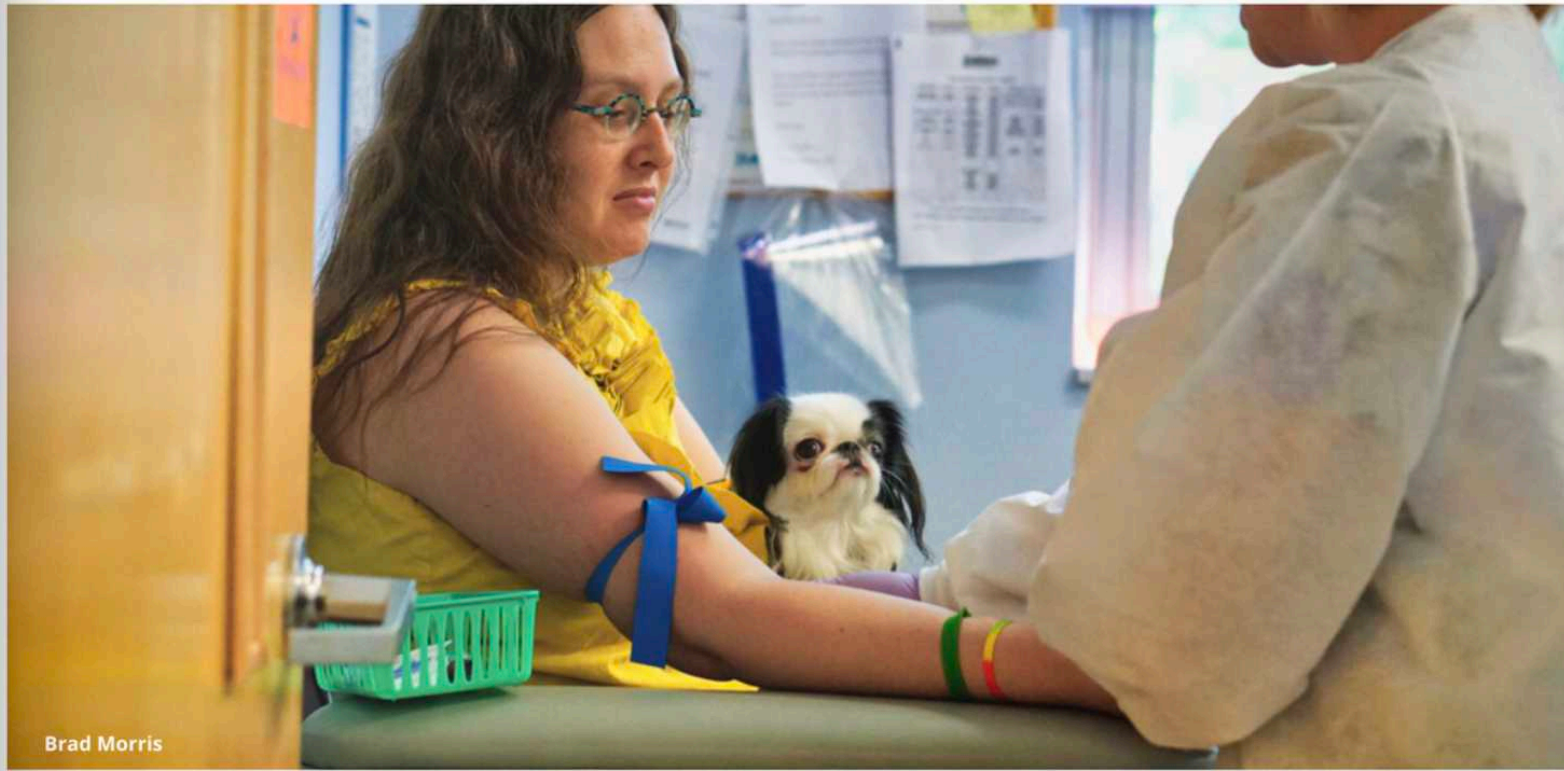
My first service dog was a Weimaraner and Pit Bull mix named Sabrina. When I started using her, I was able to walk around the store without holding onto my husband, and eventually could go into different aisles. My second service dog was a Standard Poodle named Ollivander.



With him I started to be able to make short trips to stores by myself, but I still couldn't drive and had a difficult time paying.

With Hestia, I've been able to re-learn how to drive, and I now regularly go to the grocery store by myself. I now have only two or three panic attacks a week, as one of the other things she does if she is in my arms is she alerts to my rising anxiety before it turns into a full blown panic attack.

My first two service dogs were big dogs, so how did my third dog turn out to be a Japanese Chin?



Brad Morris

Above

Hestia the service dog accompanies her owner, keeping her calm.

I realized my poodle was able to provide the pressure therapy I needed just with the weight of his head. A small dog weighs about that much—and is a lot easier to fit places like airplanes!

Japanese Chin are not commonly used for service work, probably because they aren't a well known breed. They have several characteristics that make them a natural at service work, as well as a couple that make them more of a challenge.

Before I start listing all the wonderful things about Chin as service dogs, no breed of dog makes a perfect service dog. Every dog breed has their pros and cons.

Luckily with civil rights in the U.S., people are allowed to train their own service dogs. This means we can pick the breed that works best for us.

I had never met a Japanese Chin when I decided I wanted one. I knew one person online with a Chin service dog. I was reading about the breed and the more I read, the more I fell in love. They are perky, playful, happy, low energy, less barky than many other breeds, get along well with other animals, they love to cuddle, seek attention, and are responsive.

They have been bred to make humans laugh! What person wouldn't be cheered by such a dog!

Of course the training process hasn't been all roses. It normally takes two years for someone to train their own service dog. I recommend people use both the services of a positive reinforcement-based trainer and a support group of other service dog users to help with the training.

It took me about two years to train each of my previous dogs.

It took me three years to train Hestia! That's because of the drawbacks of the breed. Chin tend to be a little mischievous, and not as interested in obedience as other breeds I had worked with. Potty training was also a little difficult. But the drawbacks are worth it for me.

Hestia is six now. Service dogs tend to retire by eight to ten. I plan to get another Chin in a year.

Learn more about service dogs at www.psych.dog.