

A man with short blonde hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and red shorts, is sitting in a black wheelchair. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. A brown capuchin monkey is perched on his shoulder, looking towards the camera. The background is a solid orange color. In the top left corner, there is a blue circle. The title 'USA WEEKEND' is written in large white letters across the top. Below the title, the date 'JULY 5-7, 2013' and the website 'usaweekend.com' are written in smaller white text. On the right side, the main article title 'A SENSE OF PURPOSE' is written in large white and yellow letters. Below it, a short paragraph of text describes the article's content. At the bottom, there is a black banner with white text listing other articles in the issue: 'ICE CREAM S'MORES • GREAT OUTDOOR GEAR • BROOKE SHIELDS ON AGING'. In the bottom right corner, there is a yellow box with the text 'IN THIS ISSUE' in black.

# USA WEEKEND

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## A SENSE OF PURPOSE

A car crash left **Ned Sullivan** unable to do life's simplest tasks. Then he met a capuchin named **Kasey**. We visit Monkey College to meet a whole new breed of helper animals.

ICE CREAM S'MORES • GREAT OUTDOOR GEAR • BROOKE SHIELDS ON AGING

IN THIS  
ISSUE

# MONKEY see. MONKEY do.

The graduates of this college aren't just monkeying around. Their little hands make a big difference.

BY NATALIE DIBLASIO



**K**asey can't keep her hands off Ned. Adjusting his hair, pulling at his shirt, chatting away, glaring at anyone who comes near him — he can hardly get a word in with all of her fussing. Ned sighs as Kasey nonchalantly peers into his ear.

Kasey is a capuchin monkey. Ned Sullivan, 30, is paralyzed with a brain injury. For the past six years, Kasey has been

there to help with everything from the simple adjustment of a blanket and turning on the lights to even helping Sullivan slow his heart rate when he is in pain.

The 27-year-old specially trained primate is one of Helping Hands' 164 helper monkeys, placed with people who have spi-

nal cord injuries or other mobility impairments. Helping Hands is a Boston-based national non-profit that raises and trains monkeys to assist people with special needs.

Everything changed for Sullivan in June 2005, the night his car crashed into a brick wall at 40 mph. Doctors told his mother,

Ellen Rogers, that the force of the crash severed everything that connected Sullivan's skull to his spine.

Immediately after the accident, doctors told Rogers that Sullivan probably would never move, talk or even breathe on his own. "There can be no expectation of

functional recovery with a devastating injury like this," she was told.

But with hard work, time, support — and what his doctors called a miracle — Sullivan, then 22, made a recovery. He can breathe and speak, has limited mobility in his arms, and is starting to ever-so-slightly kick one foot.

"Eek! Gaaaak," Kasey interrupts, heralding the arrival of Guy and Bailey, the family dogs, before rushing to curl up just under Sullivan's chin.

"This is her safe ground," Sullivan says as Kasey sits on his neck.

Sullivan's iPhone slips from his lap as he talks. Immediately, Kasey moves to retrieve it. Her small, fingers wrap around the phone, fidgeting with the buttons on the screen briefly before placing it in his hand.

Helper monkeys can perform tasks that require fine-motor skills, from scratching a nose, setting up a drink of water, repositioning feet and arms after muscle spasms, loading DVDs and CDs, adjusting glasses and turning the pages of a book. In doing so, they provide their human companions, who have limited or no use of their limbs, with greater independence.

Fifty monkeys are in training now in Boston at Monkey College, says Megan Talbert, executive director of Helping Hands.

"We get several hundred initial inquiries a year, but that doesn't mean [the individual will] qualify or are in an appropriate home for a monkey," Talbert says. "We end up placing eight to twelve helper monkeys a year."

The monkeys are bred for this purpose at a zoo in Massachusetts and raised in foster homes until

## LENDING A HELPFUL HAND



Monkey College trainer Allyson Migneault teaches a student to turn a light switch on and off.



Monkeys can learn to operate machinery, such as a CD player.



They can also perform tasks like getting a drink of water.

**MONKEY FACTS**

Capuchin monkeys are native to Central and South America.

15th-century explorers named the monkeys after Capuchin monks, whose hooded robes resembled the monkeys' coloring.

Capuchins weigh 3 to 9 pounds. In the wild, they eat fruits and nuts as well as small vertebrates.

Capuchins can live into their 40s in captivity.

they are 8-10 years old, at ease with people and ready to begin training.

Monkeys typically spend three to five years at Monkey College learning the ins and outs of refrigerators and microwaves, how to turn lights on and off on command and how to work a remote control.

The capuchin monkeys — selected because of their small size, intelligence and natural inclination to make use of tools — do more than help with chores. They give their companions a sense of purpose.

"We hear it time and time again from our recipients: 'I've got to get out of bed to take care of the monkey. He is depending on me.' They have to think about needs outside of their own and that's really empowering," Talbert says. "Our recipients have had so much focus come back to their own needs and their own care. Now they have a little creature that's depending on them for care."

And there is a lot to take care of. "It isn't like having a cat or a dog. It's like having a three-year-old who doesn't speak English," Talbert says.

It costs about \$40,000 to train and place a monkey from start to finish. Thanks to individual donors and foundation grants, recipients don't pay anything.

"A lot of our recipients have injuries that have made them unable to work or have an income," Talbert says. "The only thing we ask the recipients to pay for is monkey chow which is about \$30 a bag every six weeks."

It's not all hard work at Monkey College. The monkeys' favorite part of the day is the morning, when the television sets are

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turned on.

"They love to watch newscasters or anyone is talking and being expressive, because they think this person is talking to them," Talbert says with a laugh. "Winston loves Vanna White. Cathy is obsessed with Barack Obama. She goes up to the television and flirts with him. Her favorite day was the State of the Union."

The team at Helping Hands learns a lot about each animal's personality during its years in training. Some monkeys prefer men

or women. Some are shy or outgoing. Some like dogs, some don't.

"We will wait to make the right match, no matter how far that monkey is from graduation," Talbert says.

Allyson Migneault, a placement trainer and veterinary technician, sits in a wheelchair in "the apartment," the final training room where monkeys learn advanced skills like opening food containers and operating a CD player.

A student enjoys bath time at Boston's Monkey College.

Holding out a fingerful of hummus, Migneault says, "Good boy Win!" as Winston, the 26-year-old capuchin, adjusts the trainer's foot, which had fallen off its rest on the wheelchair.

"Winston prefers hummus to peanut butter — the usual reward," Migneault explains.

Winston has had two previous companions and is almost ready for a new home.

"He should be with someone serious like him," Migneault says.

"Someone who is in a quiet home. He loves to cuddle and to groom my head. He is a well-rounded monkey."

Kasey and Ned Sullivan turned out to be a perfect match, but it didn't happen immediately.

"Kasey is a diva," Sullivan's mother says as she walks around the room with Kasey clinging to her leg as if it were a tree trunk.

"It took about a year for the two of them to have such a strong bond." Rogers detailed the topsyturvy world of having a capuchin monkey join her already-chaotic

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and videos from  
Monkey College.

household in her 2010 book *Kasey to the Rescue*.

Though a loyal and loving companion, Kasey is far from just a mindless servant. She's intelligent (and willful) about her responsibilities.

"She would help out a lot more if someone [else] wasn't helping me," Sullivan explains. "Kasey, or any of the monkeys, realize what a person can or can't do."

Kasey will wait to see if Sullivan's mother or another person will attend to his needs. "If I drop my cellphone, she is able to figure out, 'Someone else is right over there and can get it.'" And often, Kasey just has her own agenda. "Sometimes she will just be a brat about it," he says with a laugh.

Kasey chirps happily, seemingly in agreement, as she picks through Sullivan's hair.

Kasey can select a DVD from the stack, put it in the player and hit "play." Unfortunately for Sullivan, she always wants to watch *Good Will Hunting*.

Helper monkeys give the people they assist a chance to live a richer, healthier life.

"A monkey looks at its recipient as: 'You are my caretaker. My world revolves around you,'" Talbert says. "When monkeys look at their recipients, they don't look at the disability, or what they are not able to do. They look at their recipient as the person that protects them, provides for them and will watch over them."

"That bond, that purpose, means everything." ▣

Natalie DiBlasio is a Monkey College fan and a reporter for USA TODAY.