Student receives service dog through local organization

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A student at West Virginia University will soon be getting a helping paw from a service dog thanks to donations from an area middle school.

Justin Heydon, a senior mechanical engineering major who is paralyzed, is receiving his own service dog through the organization.

Students at South Middle School helped raise \$2,100 for paws4people, an organization founded in 2005 that trains dogs to help people with disabilities.

The students presented paws4people with a check on Nov. 19.

Sue Heydon, vice principal of South Middle School and Justin's mother, organized a school dance to benefit her son.

Justin was paralyzed on July 4, 2009, when broke his neck by hitting his head on coral when he dived into the Atlantic Ocean off the New Jersey coast.



Matt Sunday/The Daily Athenaeum Justin Heydon, a WVU senior, visits South Middle School to receive his new service dog, a golden retriever named Oliver.

Justin will be receiving his service dog, Oliver, once the dog completes its public training, said Heidi Livengood, paws4people's chief trainer. Oliver was trained by female inmates at the Hazelton Penitentiary in Bruceton Mills, W.Va.

"Justin will learn to utilize Oliver's commands. Oliver knows about 100," Livengood said.

Justin said Oliver can lift Justin's leg back up if it were to fall off of the foot stand of his wheelchair, pick up things he might drop and open doors for him.

Sue said she was looking forward to Oliver coming to live with them so Justin can gain some of his independence back.

"Oliver will be able to sleep on his bed, help him move around on campus," she said. "Justin

1 of 2

says he'll be a 'chick magnet' with Oliver around."

Justin said he also is ready for more independence and is also hoping to have a car specially designed for his needs.

"The rug was sort of pulled out from under me after the accident," he said. "Oliver is going to really help me out."

Paws4people hosts a meeting for potential dogs to interact with their future clients, Livengood said. Oliver and Justin had a "special connection" upon meeting each other, so Oliver began training to meet Justin's specific needs, she said.

The organization does not set prices for the dogs but requires clients to have a public awareness campaign that raises money from the community, Livengood said.

"We figure these families have financial burdens already," she said. "We just want to make them available to whoever needs one."

2 of 2 11/30/2010 8:30 AM