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Ferris freshman, roommate team to conquer college

BIG RAPIDS, Mich. – While Ferris State University freshman Valarie Franklin is just starting to make her mark in college, her roommate is already near the top of the class.

Franklin, a pre-pharmacy major and Honors Program student from Davison, was born with brittle bone disease and uses a wheelchair to navigate campus. Her assistance dog, Sunny, makes some of her daily routines possible.

He assists her with balance, retrieves objects and gains people's attention when the pair is faced with high countertops in offices or stores. The Golden Retriever gives Franklin the independence to live in Helen Ferris residence hall since he can bring the phone, open doors and find someone else if she needs help.

Sunny was recently selected as one of two national runners-up for Assistance Dog of the Year in the "Salute to Assistance Dogs" contest, sponsored by Eukanuba Dog Food and the Iams Company. More than 130 assistance dogs were nominated for their life-changing qualities and services. The award for Franklin's four-year-old companion, who was nominated by her mother, DyAnne, is a year's supply of Eukanuba,

"When I was in high school, my parents worried about me staying home by myself," explained Franklin, 18. "If I fell, I might not be able to get up or get to the phone to get help."

So she contacted Paws With A Cause, an organization based in Wayland that trains assistance dogs nationally for persons with disabilities. She met Sunny, and soon his training was being customized to meet Franklin's specific needs. He also fit the bill as a low-key dog that wouldn't excitedly jump and knock her over.

"The instructors at Paws With A Cause taught me how to work with the dog and how to give him instructions on what I need," said Franklin. "After first bringing Sunny home, we passed our 30-day hold by showing we had mastered all tasks. From there, I had ownership of Sunny."

The accompanying responsibility of taking care of Sunny all the time was a difficult adjustment. "The first year was tough," recalled Franklin. "I'd ask my mom to help with feeding Sunny, and she'd remind me, 'He's your dog!' It was kind of like having a kid in that he's with me all the time and depends on me for care just like I depend on him for things."

Franklin now calls Sunny's arrival "a life-changing experience." Furthermore, she notices how people now focus on her dog and not her disability upon first glance. "Having Sunny has meant less worry for my parents and more independence for me," Franklin said. "I like how the attention is now on him instead of me."

She noted that, in addition to Sunny's help, she has the assistance of many new friends she has made at Ferris. The Davison High School graduate, who has a brother and sister, enjoys movies and shopping when not studying.

As a Ferris Honors Program student, Franklin is one of more than 500 students from a wide range of disciplines who receive specialized academic courses and new learning opportunities. Students are chosen for the program on the basis of academic achievement, leadership abilities and dedication to their studies and communities.



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