

Wishing on a Star

Erin and her twin sister were born attached, and the surgery to separate them left Erin paralyzed. When her parents found out that a service dog might help her, they were led to an unlikely place.

By **CINDY RICH**

MELISSA BUCKLES didn't know what to expect when a steel door closed behind her and her three young daughters at a federal prison in the West Virginia mountains two years ago. She was shaking. A former high-school English teacher, she'd never been inside a jail before. She pictured hardened criminals.

An officer put an invisible stamp on Melissa's hand and told her it would be checked under a black light before she could leave. The stamp kept inmates from escaping by posing as visitors. Melissa wondered: What would it be like to have to stay here?

Her four-year-old daughter, Erin, couldn't go through the metal detector because of her leg braces, so officers used a wand to search her. Erin was the reason the family had traveled four hours from their home in Stafford, Virginia, to the United States Penitentiary at Hazelton. Inmates there train dogs to help veterans and people with disabilities. A black Lab that was trained at the prison as a psychiatric service dog wakes a Marine from his nightmares; one of the group's golden retrievers warns a little boy's parents when their son is about to have a seizure.

Erin wanted a dog so badly that she'd been looking out her bedroom window

at night, wishing on a star. When it was time to meet the dogs, she wheeled herself around the prison recreation room, petting them and talking to inmates. Melissa was struck by the women's stories: Some hadn't seen their kids in years. One was a few classes away from her PhD.

Erin's dreams are going to be realized right here, Melissa thought. In the same place where these women have to let go of theirs.

At six years old, Erin Buckles weighs half as much as Solomon, the 60-pound black Lab who's supposed to sleep at the end of her bed but likes to share her pillow.

She's nicknamed him Happy because he always looks like he's smiling—except when she's sick: "He lays by me and makes a sad face."

Solomon spent the first part of his life at the West Virginia prison. He arrived at Erin's house just before Christmas with his leash and maroon service-dog vest—when he wears it, that means he's working and nobody should pet him. He

Erin, six, with her service dog, Solomon. "She was the girl in the wheelchair," her mother says. "Now she's the girl with the cool dog."

Photographs by **MATTHEW WORDEN**



drank from a glass of milk Erin and her sisters had left for Santa. He can flip light switches, open doors, and help Erin get undressed, but he isn't perfect. "Once he jumped on Mom's new bedcovers," she says.

A year ago, strangers stared at Erin. She wouldn't raise her hand in school and always wanted to be near her mother. Now she volunteers to do solos in her singing class. "She was the girl in the wheelchair," Melissa says. "Now she's the girl with the cool dog."

On the mantel in the Buckles living room, near Solomon's kennel, is a photo of Erin and her twin sister, Jade, taken a few months after they were born. A blanket covers their conjoined bodies. The girls were attached from chest to navel—more than half of Erin's heart was tucked inside her sister's chest.

Ten in every million births are conjoined twins; most don't survive. Erin and Jade shared a liver; their hearts beat in sync. Melissa would pat one baby on the back and the other would burp.

Doctors at Children's National Medical Center separated them in June 2004, when they were four months old, but a stroke to Erin's spinal cord during the surgery left her paralyzed from the chest down. Her twin sister, Jade, is fine.

Before Solomon moved in with Erin, a kindergartner at Stafford's Widewater Elementary, he shared a cell with Susan Edwards, a convicted felon. For months, with the help of another inmate, Edwards fed and walked Solomon, bathed him, brushed his teeth. She taught him to take her socks and shoes off, to pull a wheelchair—things he'd have to do for Erin. Every day she found herself thinking about a little girl she barely knew.

Nearly all of the 452 women who live in Hazelton's Secure Female Facility are



Melissa Buckles holds her four-month-old twins, Erin and Jade, before the surgery that separated them.

mothers. They wear beige uniforms and share metal bunk beds. Their toilets are in their cells, out in the open, a few feet from where they sleep. Many are serving time for drug convictions; others are there for armed robbery, arson, embezzlement. A few murdered someone.

Edwards, who's serving 45 months, doesn't talk about why she's in prison.

"I made a mistake," she says. A 36-year-old army wife who recently missed her daughter's sweet-16 party, Edwards has reddish-brown hair and blue eyes. "It took me out of my perfect little world."

She thought she'd be spending her time at Hazelton locked in a cell, often in handcuffs, guilty not only of a crime but of deserting her family. When she got there, she saw a commissary and a beauty shop. Women were walking dogs.

No way, Edwards thought. She had a Labrador-poodle mix at home. *They have dogs here?*

She hadn't put her bag down in her cell when someone came to talk to her about joining Paws4prisons, part of

a Northern Virginia-based nonprofit called Paws4people. Inmates at Hazelton have been training dogs since the women's prison opened four years ago. Most trainers are nonviolent offenders; women with a history of abuse toward children or animals can't participate.

Unit manager Susan Folk learned about Paws4prisons through West Virginia University, where the group's cofounder, Kyria Henry, was in college. Henry had decided when she was 12 that she wanted her golden retriever, Riley, to help people, and she started taking him to nursing homes. Her father, Terry, quit his telecommunications job to start Paws4people. The group, which doesn't have a paid staff, runs programs in five federal prisons and works with wounded soldiers at Fort Stewart, Georgia.

"It teaches nurturing skills and discipline," says Folk, who has a sign on her desk that reads *HAPPINESS IS IN THE HEART, NOT IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES*. "It can help them heal from past trauma and take ownership over their lives."

Edwards was nervous about meeting the Buckles family at Hazelton. When you're in prison, she says, you don't know how people will react to you. Melissa hugged Edwards, and they talked about their families. Both of their husbands are in the military; Kevin Buckles is drum major for the US Marine Drum & Bugle Corps.

"You're not what I was expecting," Melissa said.

She never asked Edwards what she'd done to end up at Hazelton. It didn't matter.

Solomon was an accident. His mother, Bella, a chocolate Lab, got together with another Lab unexpectedly. Their owner, Tina Gifford, noticed Bella was gaining weight, took her to the vet, and found

Photograph of Melissa Buckles with twins by Carol Guzy/Washington Post via Getty Images; Edwards by Casey Miller; prison courtesy of Dan Greenwall



Solomon was trained to be a service dog by Susan Edwards, an inmate who takes part in a program called Paws4prisons.



The penitentiary where Edwards is serving a 45-month sentence. An army wife with five children, she says: "I made a mistake."



Edwards with Erin's mother at Solomon's graduation from training. Erin's mom never asked Edwards why she was in prison.



out she was pregnant. Solomon and seven litter mates—six black Labs, one yellow—arrived ten days later.

Tina and her husband, who worked at Hazelton, had always adored Labs. But they hadn't planned on eight puppies and Tina wasn't comfortable giving them away or selling them. The puppies chewed on her Scooby-Doo slippers. She would come home from work and Bella would look at her as if to say, "It's your turn," as though the two of them were raising the puppies together.

Solomon was the first of the puppies to find his way out of the fenced yard. He learned to fetch before his litter mates and quickly mastered paper training. The Giffords named him after King Solomon, known in the Bible for wisdom.

Erin Faith Buckles was two when her mom read a story in the magazine *Kids on Wheels* about a boy and his service dog. Melissa knew that dogs helped blind people but hadn't realized what they could do for children like her daughter. She started making calls.

"Everyone said, 'We don't give service dogs to kids,'" she says. "The youngest they'd give one to was 18."

Erin was too small for a wheelchair, so she was using a scooter—a crawling frame molded to fit her body—to roll around on the floor. That was her way of "running" the way her sisters did.

She was starting physical therapy at the International Center for Spinal Cord Injury, part of Baltimore's Kennedy Krieger Institute. The neurologist who founded the center, John McDonald, is the same doctor who helped actor Christopher Reeve recover some of his sensory function.

Melissa and Kevin had been told when Erin was a baby that if she didn't recover movement within a year of her injury, she never would. But they'd also been told that most conjoined twins don't survive past birth and that the surgery to separate their daughters could kill them, so they weren't giving up hope that Erin would walk. Melissa liked the idea that while Erin was in therapy, a service dog could make her feel more independent.

She was at Kennedy Krieger with Erin when a woman from West Virginia told her about the service dog her daughter was getting.

"What?" Melissa asked. "How?"

The woman told her that Paws4people didn't have the age restrictions other

Solomon is supposed to sleep at the end of Erin's bed, but when she's asleep he likes to share her pillow.

groups had. Kyria Henry had been bringing therapy dogs into special-education classrooms in Loudoun County. She was comfortable getting dogs used to school bells and fire drills. She knew that a lot of dogs wouldn't have the temperament to see a child as their master, but Labs and golden retrievers are neotonized breeds, meaning they stay young developmentally. Most just want to please their owners.

"They look to their masters as parents, rather than other breeds who need more of an alpha or a pack leader," says Henry.

In one classroom Henry worked in, a student with cerebral palsy who would take only a few steps without falling held onto a dog's leash and walked through the school building.

Edwards started working with Solomon when he was eight weeks old. Every inmate at the prison has to have a job—cleaning, cooking, tutoring—and hers was training a Lab puppy. She'd left five children at home in South Carolina. She was used to taking her kids to church

and coaching them in softball. She liked having someone to take care of.

She started off as an “alternate handler” while more experienced trainers taught her what to do. She kept Solomon’s kennel and toys at the end of her bed. He stayed away from things that weren’t his, such as toilet-paper rolls on the floor and the shoes Edwards kept under her bed. He liked to cuddle so much that he often lay down next to Edwards for hours with his paw on her shoulder.

Solomon had 120 commands to learn—from “be nice,” when he gently took food from his handler’s fingers, to “stay,” when he stayed in one place even though nobody was watching him. Edwards used a small board with a switch to teach him how to turn lights on because he couldn’t reach the ones on the wall. She taught him how to “read” commands on cards—sit, down, heel—by recognizing the letters.

He struggled with closing doors. “He had a habit of pushing things too hard,” Edwards says. “He’d hear it slam and look at me like, ‘I’m sorry.’”

The days were busy: Morning walk at 7. Breakfast. Playtime. Training classes. Another walk. Chow hall. Edwards felt the time going faster. She had someone

else to focus on, something to think about besides what she’d done.

Erin met Solomon at one of her dad’s evening parades at the Marine Barracks. Kyria Henry from Paws4people had brought Solomon and a few other puppies to Washington to see how they interacted with Erin. Henry calls the meeting a “bump.” Certain dogs click with certain people, and a bump helps Henry decide who will make a good match. Solomon went right up to Erin and put his head on her lap.

Melissa knew the wait would be hard for Erin. It would be at least a year until Solomon graduated—she was too young to understand how long that was. She kept asking, “When do I get my dog?”

During one visit with Solomon, Erin dropped Froot Loops next to his paw, telling him to “leave it,” and he did. Paws4people uses Froot Loops instead of dog treats in case children pick them up and eat them. Food-related commands are often the hardest, Henry says, but Solomon listened to someone he could easily have overpowered.

Whenever Erin saw Solomon, she wanted to bring him home. One afternoon, she sat in the family’s hotel room

in West Virginia waiting for Henry’s car to pull up with Solomon in it. She barely ate dinner that night because the dog was lying under the table a few feet away.

When Erin was hospitalized with pneumonia in September, Henry brought Solomon to Children’s Hospital to see her. Erin had gone to sleep with a low-grade fever and woke up in the middle of the night with a 104.8-degree temperature. Melissa watched as she was taken away in a Medevac helicopter. Any illness can be dangerous for Erin because she can’t cough easily; pneumonia is life-threatening.

Erin was stable when Solomon got there the next day and jumped up on her hospital bed.

“She had to get a breathing treatment, and he wasn’t sure if it was something that was harming her,” Melissa says. “So he stayed right there.”

At the prison, Edwards spoke to Solomon in a whisper to get him used to taking commands from someone with a soft voice. She took him outside and asked other inmates to run around playing catch with a big red ball. She wanted to get him ready for recess at Erin’s school.

“He would have to lay in the perfect ‘down stay,’” says Edwards.

Thinking back to the time a dog grabbed her ice-cream cone when she was a child, Edwards pictured Erin holding a peanut-butter sandwich with Solomon next to her.

Dogs at the prison aren’t allowed to eat human food—inmates can get removed from Paws4people for feeding it to them—but she worried about what would happen to Solomon when he was surrounded by kids.

“He had to learn ‘This is mine, that’s yours,’” she says.

When it was time to teach Solomon the “go alert” command so he could let somebody know if Erin needed help, Edwards stood at one end of her housing unit and pretended to slip and fall.

“Go alert Crystal,” she said.

Solomon ran across the unit looking for Crystal, whose name he’d heard four or five times, until he found her at the officer’s station and nudged her hand with his nose.

“He made a beeline back to me,” Edwards says. He was running so fast that he couldn’t stop, and he ended up jumping over Edwards, who was lying on the floor as if hurt.

Last year, when Edwards found out



Erin is still learning commands for Solomon. Until she knows them all, her mother is his primary handler. Solomon—who wears a vest when he’s working—can turn on lights, put food in a grocery cart, and pick up a crayon if Erin drops it.

that her brother, an Iraq and Desert Storm veteran, had committed suicide, she wanted time to grieve and thought about asking someone else to care for Solomon. But her brother's death made what she was doing seem real in a way it hadn't before. He'd had posttraumatic stress disorder—she wondered if the companionship of a service dog might have saved him.

Keep going, she told herself. You have to train this dog for this little girl.

One day in the spring of 2009, Edwards found out Solomon was leaving the next morning. Trainers from Paws4people spend a few months taking the dogs to restaurants, malls, and schools to expose them to life outside the prison. Solomon needed practice putting food in a grocery cart and staying calm around kids. He had to be able to walk through a pet store without trying to take the toys.

The plan was always for Solomon to learn what he needed to and move on. That's what Edwards wanted. She'd been showing Solomon a photo of Erin every day and saying the girl's name over and over again. But she'd gotten used to having Solomon waiting in his kennel when she came back from seeing her children in the visitation area.

"He let me be a mom," she says.

When Solomon passed all his tests and it was time for him to graduate in November, Edwards wrote a speech.

"When we came to prison, we became a number. No one needed us," she told the crowd in the prison chapel. Her husband had made the ten-hour drive. Erin's family was there. "This program gave us that need we all desire. We are mothers, sisters, and friends again. You see past our numbers."

Solomon, one of eight dogs to graduate that day, started circling Edwards when the Buckleses walked in the door. Edwards gave the family his vest and handed over his leash.

"Okay," she said to Erin with tears in her eyes. She'd kept Solomon's baby teeth and the collar he'd worn as a puppy. "Here's your dog."

Solomon spent his first two weeks in Stafford tethered to Melissa for "umbilical-cord training." Erin wanted him to herself—she'd started a countdown three weeks before graduation—but because Melissa is his primary handler, he had to bond with her first.

The family's black cat, Ninja, who's



The Buckles family—Jade, Erin, Melissa, Taylor, and Kevin—with Solomon. On the day Erin met the dog, he went up to her and put his head on her lap. Seventeen months later, Erin got to take him home.

ten, hissed at Solomon when he came in the door. Solomon wagged his tail.

Erin and Jade gave Solomon the middle name Prince. "Ninja's the king of the castle," Melissa says. "Solomon's the prince."

She wrote a book for Erin's classmates to read about why she had a dog at school. They'd met Solomon before, but it was hard for them to understand that he was there to work, not play. Sometimes Erin's sisters, Jade and Taylor, can't resist petting him when his vest is on. He always has to wear the vest when he's out of the house, but it's off when he's home and the girls are doing their homework or watching TV.

Melissa works afternoons as a math assistant at Erin's school—Solomon has a crate in the teachers' office—and she spends the first half of the day in Erin's classroom with her daughter and Solomon. Erin has more commands to learn, so the dog can't be alone with her at school. When he's with her in the mornings, he lies next to her while she's working and picks something up if she drops it. In the hallway, she uses one hand to navigate her power wheelchair and the other to hold his leash.

Erin has more feeling in her lower body than when she was a baby—doctors touch her with sharp objects or use vibrations and ask her whether she feels something. She spends two weeks at Kennedy Krieger every few months for therapy—the family stays at the Ronald McDonald House—where therapists work on strengthening Erin's muscles

and guiding her legs underwater.

"Solomon won't take his eyes off her," Melissa says. He's learning how to help her stand while she's in her leg braces. He walks next to her while therapists help her take steps—she likes knowing she can grab him if she loses balance.

About 50 days are left in Susan Edwards's sentence. She started with more than 1,000. She's made friends in prison—she and the other inmate trainers call themselves the Slammerdogz Sisters.

Edwards shares her cell with another dog now, a golden retriever named Claire that Paws4people is planning to breed. When Edwards gets home, she wants to work with dogs and veterans.

Her whole family knows about Erin and Solomon. Her husband has Solomon's photo on the wall at their home in South Carolina.

They've forgiven her, she says, because she's made good use of her time in prison: "You start to realize that you were put here for a purpose, and if Erin was the purpose, then it was worth it." ■

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More on Erin Buckles

To read "Miracle Girl," Cindy Rich's November 2007 article about Erin Buckles, and "Two Hearts Beating As One," her February 2006 story about the twins' separation, go to washingtonian.com/erin.