

Erin's Story

A Short Version

Erin is currently scheduled to receive her Service Dog in 2009, from the dogs currently undergoing training at USP - Hazelton, Bruceton Mills, WV



The volunteers of **paws4people™**, **paws4prisons™** and the **SlammerDogZ™** Programs are proud to announce the selection of Erin, a four-year-old Paraplegic, as a Private Placement Candidate for a Service / Educational Assistance Dog.

On November 6, 2003, my husband and I learned something that changed our lives forever. We found out we were having conjoined twins. The twins were connected from mid-chest to the lower abdomen. They shared one umbilical cord, liver, diaphragm, and pericardium (the sac around the heart). After spending four months in the hospital on bed rest, the babies, Erin and Jade, were delivered by C-section on February 26, 2004 at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, MD.

After being discharged on March 4, we immediately began to prepare for the separation surgery. The surgery took place on Saturday, June 19, 2004, at Children's National Medical Center, Washington, D.C. Because of the outstanding surgeons and medical teams, the surgery was over in just 6 hours and was a complete success!!! Erin and Jade were released from the hospital on July 2 -- a true Independence Day celebration!

Unfortunately, an unexpected turn of events brought us to our knees again. Erin was not moving her legs at all, and an MRI of her spine in September revealed that sometime during the surgery, Erin had a lack of blood flow (a stroke) to a section of her spinal cord (T3-T7), which caused permanent damage. Her spinal cord injury has left her as a paraplegic, having lost all function from mid-chest down. Erin now visits many specialists to manage everything that goes along with spinal cord injuries. She has been fitted with different devices and braces to help her sit and stand, and she uses a wheelchair. We are heartbroken for her, but we also know what an absolute miracle and blessing it is to have her and her sister, Jade, in our lives.

We now take Erin to the International Center for Spinal Cord Injury at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, MD for intense physical and occupational therapy. We return every few months, and each time we go, everyone is amazed at the progress she is making. Erin rides an RTI bike every day, which utilizes electrical stimulation to activate her muscles. We suspend her over a treadmill using a Lite Gait Trainer, and we walk her legs for her. This will help her body and brain learn how to walk. Erin is a very determined and tenacious little girl. She so badly wants to walk on her own someday; therefore she works hard and doesn't complain. My husband and I made the decision to do whatever it takes to help Erin recover as much function as possible. She has had to deal with so much during her short life, and she deserves every opportunity at happiness that we can provide.



Melissa Buckles and Erin at Kennedy Krieger Institute, Baltimore, MD

Erin aspires to be independent. Her identical twin sister is the model for all that she would like to accomplish. Having a Service Dog would help Erin to achieve the independence that she so badly desires. Not only would this dog help her to open doors, turn on/off lights, pick things up, and assist in countless other tasks that she can't perform on her own, it would bridge the gap in social situations that are uncomfortable to others because of Erin's disability. Erin has not had many opportunities to interact with children her own age, as we spend much of our time at therapy or doctor visits. As the anxiety of entering school approaches, the companionship of a Service Dog will increase Erin's self-confidence and allow her to socialize with other children without the focus being on her wheelchair. Her Service Dog will facilitate her acceptance, inclusion and integration into her new world of school.

Even after everything that our family has been through, we have **FAITH** that Erin will once again beat the odds; she will walk one day! However, no matter how far we have come with technological advances in our society, the thing that will help her the most is man's (or in this case a little girl's) best friend – a Service Dog.

For more information on Erin, you may go to: <http://www.erin.story.paws4people.org>

Or you can check out her Blog at: <http://www.freewebs.com/bucklesfamily>

To help Erin, and others, get their Assistance Dogs, please go to: <http://www.erin.paws4people.org>



L to R: Erin, Jade, Master Sergeant Kevin Buckles, and Taylor

Erin, an active-duty military dependent, will be **paws4vets™** first recipient of a Service Dog.