

A Different Type of Friend

In just over a year together, Scott Fedor and Melanie (the monkey) have developed a deep bond. Melanie loves to groom Scott but is just as happy hanging out and playing with Scott.

On the surface, almost everything about the friendship between Scott and Melanie is what you would expect between two 30-somethings who have shared a house for a little over a year. They've bonded over countless hours of watching baseball (his favorite) and cartoons (her favorite). Melanie patiently listens to Scott rehearse his public speaking, and Scott has grown quite fond of Melanie's mani/pedis. They've reached the point where they can silently enjoy each other's

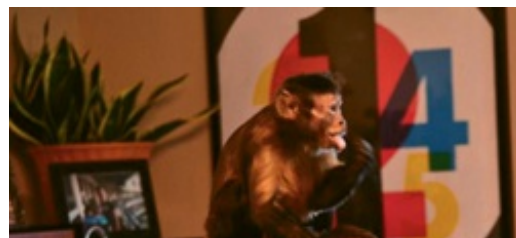
company, but still love to play games and solve puzzles together. Since moving in, Melanie has become friends with all of Scott's friends and Scott schedules his days so the two can have time to hang out.

But there are a couple of things of things that differentiate Scott and Melanie's friendship from the rest: the main ones being that Scott is a high-level quad and Melanie is a capuchin monkey.

The series of events that led up to Scott and Melanie's relationship started back in early 2010. On the urging of a friend, Scott Fedor contacted Helping Hands, the Massachusetts-based organization that provides and trains the monkeys. Soon he found himself making a video explaining his interest. Then he was working to change Ohio laws that prohibited individuals from owning certain animals. Melanie arrived last September and the two took to each other quickly. "It's a fascination that really hasn't worn off yet," he says. "I don't know if it will because it's still, 'Hey, there's a monkey living in my house!' It's something I never thought I'd be in a position to do."

As a C3 quad, Fedor has no use of his arms or hands. So when he began considering applying for a monkey helper he focused on the functional benefits of having an intelligent, trained set of hands to help him around the house. The Helping Hands website shows monkeys opening doors, picking things up, helping with grooming and doing many other tasks a high-level quad can only dream of. In practice, those benefits have taken a backseat to the companionship Melanie provides.

"When I look at her right now, I don't look at her and say, OK I'm going to let her out and she's going to help me. It's more, I'm going to let her out and we'll watch the baseball game, hang out for a little bit and laugh — and then if there is something I need assistance for, I can call on her for help. So I look at her as a companion first, and then maybe a little bit of a pet and then a helper."



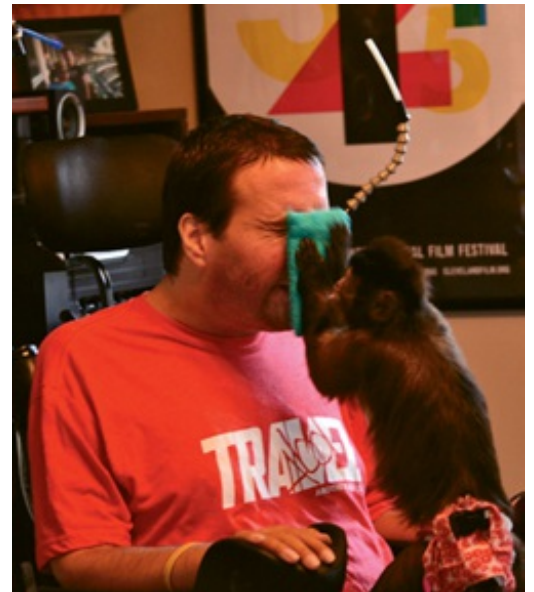
That did not surprise Megan Talbert, the executive director of Helping Hands. “Developing a relationship with a monkey is unlike any other mammal. It’s not like having a cat or a dog, it’s a much deeper connection,” she says. “Monkeys don’t look at somebody and go, ‘Gosh, he’s not able to move his arms and he’s not able to talk.’ They look at that person and they say, ‘This person takes care of me and I want to take care of them in return.’ That’s something really special that the monkeys give to people.”



Helping Hands has been matching monkeys with people with disabilities since 1979. Talbert has seen all types of relationships develop between monkeys and their owners. She says Fedor’s situation was somewhat unique, as he is one of the higher-injured recipients the program has worked with. Fedor was impressed by how quickly Melanie adapted to his situation.

Melanie has been trained to do many manual tasks Scott can not do, like washing his face (above).

“It’s almost like she knows that my body is a little bit different than what she might have been trained for, and she respects that,” he says. “She’s not afraid of helping me or hurting me, but she also realizes my limitations, in terms of my ability to pet her or my ability to give her things.”



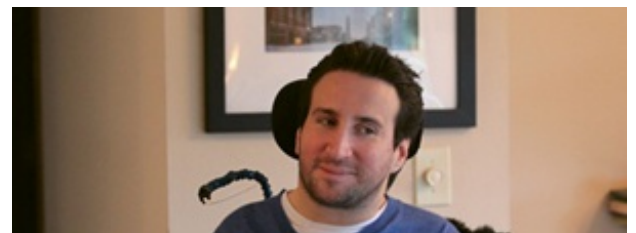
While Melanie may not do as many tasks for Fedor as some monkeys, she still loves taking care of him. “I tell all my friends, I have the best monkey manicurist and the best nails in the neighborhood. I have no cuticles, my nails are absolutely spotless,” he says. “[Grooming] is a sign of affection in the wild. I don’t know if it’s because she is overly affectionate or she’s really comfortable with me.”

When she is not grooming, Melanie loves to hang out, watch television or play games. “Hanging out with her just cracks me up,” Fedor says. Since Melanie figured out that her good deeds are often rewarded with food treats, she has worked to exploit the situation. Fedor tries to keep her on her feet by presenting her food rewards in the form of small challenges, like giving her a chopstick and placing peanut butter at the bottom of a bottle, or sealing oats in a pouch she must figure out how to open.

“It entertains the hell out of me,” he says. “I just sit there watching her. When she can’t open it sometimes she’ll make her little cute noises and she’ll hand it to me. I’m like, I’m not going to help you, and you can tell she gets a little more excited/frustrated. Then when she does figure it out she is really, really happy and she’ll stand on her two hind legs and run across the bed and holler.”

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Still, like any friendship there are hurdles. As smart as Melanie is, Fedor worries that he is unable to effectively convey how much he appreciates her devotion. “With as much time as she spends on me, I really wish I had a way of somehow reciprocating that by petting her, grooming her or throwing her a ball,” he says. “I can’t do anything about that, though.”



He also wishes there were fewer restraints on how and when the two can hang out. Fedor has around the clock assistance, but Melanie is only allowed out of the room her cage is in when her primary caregiver is present. That means there is only an eight-hour window each day for the two to roam the house. When you figure in work, therapy and other commitments, Scott and Melanie often only get two to four days a week of unfettered time together in the house. Fedor said he spends much of the rest of his time back in Melanie's room.



"She's pretty content to kind of stay with her routine, have a few little treats and pretty much just hang out with me," he says. If the weather is nice, Fedor will tie Melanie up with him outside and the two will soak up as much sun as possible. Usually, Melanie is confined to the house.

Talbert says introducing another caregiver for Melanie might be a possibility in the future. While Scott and Melanie hit it off and figured many things out quickly, Talbert reinforced the importance of time. "[The relationship] gets more complex and it does get deeper and stronger the longer they are together," she says. "The people that really take their time and let things come naturally usually do the best."

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With one year together under their belt, Fedor is eager to see how his relationship with Melanie evolves. "You never know what she's going to do," he says. "I'm constantly trying to figure out different challenges to give her and things to do with her." He acknowledges the support system of friends and caregivers and how critical that is to maintaining his happiness and well being. He likely never envisioned that a monkey would be a part of that system, but he is glad Melanie is. "She's always there with me and she'll accept me for whatever I'm doing, whatever mood I'm in," he says. "She's a constant and she puts up with the good, the bad and the ugly."