



**Ryan Delaney** plays with gears as his service dog Monroe lies nearby. Monroe goes to FHN with Delaney and helps keep him safe and calm. Monroe has been working with Ryan for four years, but Delaney's first year at North may be Monroe's last. (ashleigh jenkins)

# WALKING WITH RYAN

*Freshman Ryan Delaney gets through the school day with help from his service dog Monroe, but Monroe may not be around the halls of FHN for much longer because Ryan's independence is increasing*

**BY ASHLEIGH JENKINS**

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Monroe lies under the table in room 27A, his head rests on his large black paws. Above him, freshman Ryan Delaney stacks multicolored plastic gears on the table and talks about one of his favorite movies, "Finding Nemo." Under his sleepy black lab exterior, Monroe is alert. He is constantly listening for a change of pitch in Ryan's voice, and always watching Ryan's body language for any sign of anxiety or discomfort.

Ryan was diagnosed with Fragile X Syndrome (FXS) and autism when he was five. FXS is the most common form of inherited mental impairment which Ryan inherited from his mother, a carrier of the gene. Those affected by FXS experience mental and physical delays, such as seizures, stuttering speech, and hypersensitivity.

"It was a relief [to put a name to his condition]," Ryan's mom, Michelle Del-

aney, said. "But it was kinda devastating."

Monroe's main task at North is to keep Ryan safe. He is tethered to Ryan with a short leash, that keeps Ryan safe and close to Monroe. Ryan is a flight risk; when confronted, he will flee. He also has no sense of danger.

Watching out for Ryan isn't Monroe's only job, he also keeps Ryan's mood stable. If Ryan can't cope with his surroundings, Monroe calms his boy with his presence and patience. Monroe helps keep Ryan's anxiety in check by diverting attention from his boy and onto himself.

"If Ryan's in a big group and people look at Monroe, he'll start talking and deflect attention to Monroe," Michelle said, "He's helped Ryan socially."

While Monroe may attract the attention of others, he doesn't listen to them. Monroe was specially trained to tune out most people. He has ears only for his handler and his boy. That training allows Monroe to walk down the hallways without getting distracted.

"He's very good with other people," Ryan's para Brian Schene said. "He goes down the hallway almost like a student. He's trained so other people around him





**Ryan Delaney** stacks gears in room 27A. The toy helps with stimulus and fine motor control. Monroe lies nearby even when Ryan is calm. "Monroe's always working" **Brian Schene** said. "He lies under the desk or near Ryan, he's there to help."

**Ryan Delaney** throws Monroe's stuffed monkey in his backyard. At home, Ryan likes to play with Monroe since he gets to be a normal dog when he's off work. Ryan also enjoys watching TV and playing video games. (ashleigh jenkins)

don't bother him."

Brian has been working with Ryan since Ryan and Monroe switched from Henderson to Fairmount halfway through fifth grade. Ryan was forced to switch schools because another special needs student had problems with Monroe, with whom Ryan had started working with shortly before.

Monroe came from a service dog organization called 4 Paws for Ability, in Xenia, Ohio. Michelle contacted 4 Paws in September 2009, after Ryan escaped Henderson's after school care for the second time that year. It was fairly easy to prove Ryan qualified for a dog; the more challenging part was raising the money. It costs \$22,000 to place a dog, but families are only responsible for fund-raising \$13,000. The rest of the cost is absorbed by 4 Paws and charitable donations. In the Delaney's case, they only had to fund-raise \$6,500 because they had a friend willing to help out.

"Mom and I sold cookbooks," Michelle said. "Lots of people bought them for Christmas. Lots of people went online and donated for the holidays. A family friend said if we raised half, he'd donate the rest. He understood."

By January 2009, the Delaneys had raised the money; however, they were not placed into a training class until December. In the class, the Delaneys learned how to work with Monroe and form a three-point team: handler, child and dog. On Dec. 1, the first day of the class, 11-year-old Ryan and six-month-old Monroe became a team.

"In the beginning, it's all about that connection," Michelle said. "They wanted everything to be positive between them. If Ryan accidentally stepped on his tail, you got down and you went 'good boy, good boy' and gave him a treat."

The bond stuck. Ryan will tell almost anyone all about 'Monroe the rescue puppy' and how Monroe is his best friend. Monroe's loyalties are also clear. When asked to 'find his boy' Monroe will go charging off and smother Ryan with kisses. The bond has helped Ryan grow as a person.

"He's helped Ryan mature a little more," Michelle said. "Incidents of him running away have decreased. He knows Monroe will find him."

Because of Ryan's progress, Monroe may be spending more time at home and less in the hallways at North in the future. The Delaneys plan to pull Monroe back second semester and have him retire completely by Ryan's sophomore year. Michelle hopes that retiring Monroe will help Ryan gain independence. After retirement, Monroe would become the Delaney's pet. An average service dog's career is around seven years.



"There isn't much a difference when Monroe's gone," Brian said. "When Ryan doesn't need Monroe, he works the same no matter what."

Until Monroe is officially pulled from school, he will continue to accompany Ryan to school and his various extra curricular activities. One of Ryan's many after school activities is Teen Club. Teen Club is after school care for kids with special needs. It is sponsored by Community Living Inc., a local nonprofit dedicated to helping those with special needs explore the community. Monroe accompanies Ryan to Teen Club everyday and goes with them on field trips. Ryan also participates in special needs baseball, Therapeutic Horsemanship, and swims and bowls for the Special Olympics.

"They've helped him socially," Michelle said. "He meets other people. It's given him confidence."

After Teen Club is over, Ryan and Monroe head home. As soon as the harness leaves his back, Monroe goes back to being a normal dog. He plays fetch, greets visitors, and chews on bones. Monroe never really stops working, though. He looks after Ryan and keeps him safe at all times, even in the evening, and then he heads off to spend the night sleeping next to his boy.

## WATCH IT



Use the link [goo.gl/SR1BmZ](http://goo.gl/SR1BmZ) to see a video of Ryan Delaney and why he has his service dog Monroe.

