

CASE STUDY: Making Sure 4-Legged Support Animals Can Help Buy a Car

“These women are beasts! As my father would say, ‘They don’t take tea for the fever.’ They are on speed dial if I ever need an attorney again.”

CHALLENGE

Emotional support animals are commonplace these days – or so one would think. Take Valerie Gibbs, a U.S. Navy veteran who lives with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and doesn’t leave home without her emotional support dog, Oscar de la Renta. Valerie needed to buy a car, but the car dealership she visited turned her away when they saw Oscar. “I had my dog on a leash, and had the paperwork for him, but they said they wouldn’t do business with me because of my dog,” Valerie said. “I put the documents on the dealer’s desk, and he wouldn’t even look at them. He asked what I need the dog for, and I knew that was another violation. I have panic attacks and have high anxiety, and this was very hard. I got back in my car and broke down. I couldn’t believe it was happening in real time.”

Valerie turned to LegalMatch, which sends out feelers to attorneys. Heather Wright responded to fully understand Valerie’s situation and get to know her better. “I felt her sincerity,” Valerie said. “She understood my predicament. I was drawn to her because of her compassion for my circumstance and felt she would handle my case very well.”

SOLUTION

Heather and her team started by conducting research on Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) violations to confirm Valerie had a case. Once the team decided to move forward, they asked Valerie what she envisioned her happy moment be at the end of this. “I wanted to hurt the dealership a bit so they recognized they have to treat veterans better,” Valerie said. “I wanted them to be called on the carpet for treating a veteran so poorly. I threw out a monetary amount, but it didn’t really matter how much I received. I told (Heather and Vickie) I wasn’t in it for the money as much as changing their policy against violating the ADA law.”

The Wright Attorneys team prepared and showed Valerie the filing they were sending to the dealership and had her review it to confirm she agreed with the complaint. Unfortunately, the dealership denied everything when they received the paperwork. In the initial mediation, the lawyers tried to low ball, and Valerie asked Vickie to remind the dealership representatives she suffers from PTSD, and their employees need to be educated on it. “They were trying to say I didn’t feel that bad because I went and bought a car later that day, but I had to buy a car,” Valerie said. “They wanted to say I didn’t deserve any punitive damages because I bought a car. Vickie let them know they can’t say someone is OK and not traumatized since PTSD looks different in each person it impacts.”

RESULTS

As the case progressed, Vickie and the Wright team were very empathetic, providing support and helping Valerie understand the situation while guiding her to not worry about the things the other side was throwing at them in the courtroom. In the final session, the car dealership reconciled (and Vickie won a settlement for Valerie) and said they would educate their employees, include PTSD-related information in their employee handbook and add a sign to the door saying service dogs are allowed. “I give them kudos for that and hope it influences others to do the same thing,” Valerie said.

But it was her work with Vickie and Heather that made the difference. “They felt what I felt. They wanted to help me, and they weren’t in it for the money but to right a wrong,” Valerie said. “They embraced me like I was their sister or friend. I felt like I had known them forever. We connected so effortlessly. They were always available when I needed them or had questions or concerns. It was such a bond that we had, and they made me feel at ease and helped me relax and not stress out.”