

Monkey Do

When she's not sneaking the peanut butter, this highly trained capuchin is the best caretaker a guy could have

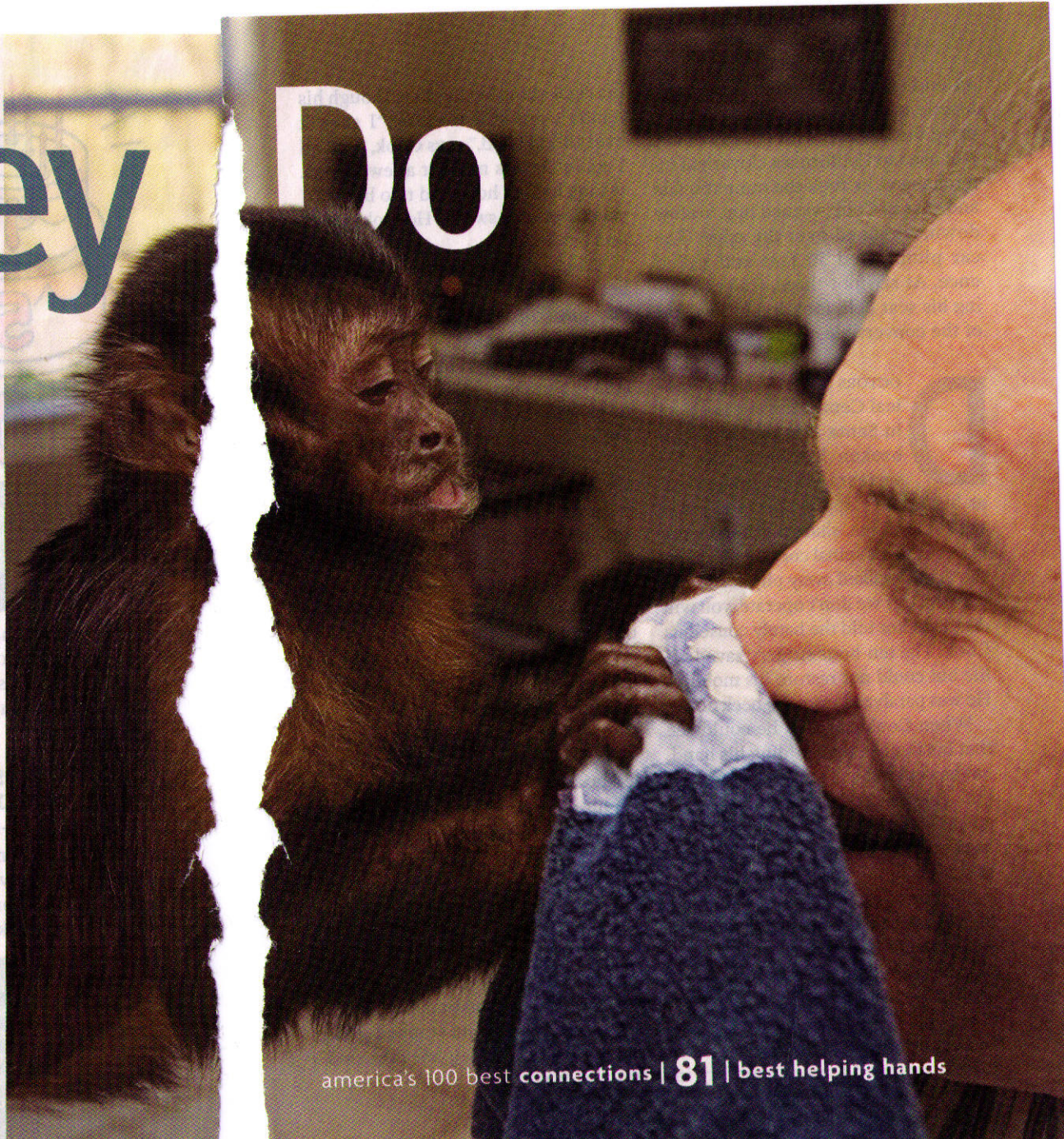
BY JAN GOODWIN

MINNIE GRABS A BAG of popcorn from the top of the refrigerator and puts it in the microwave. She slips a DVD into the player and, snuggling in front of the TV with Craig Cook, the man in her life, tears open the bag. Making sure it isn't too hot, she places a kernel in Cook's mouth before snacking herself. And so it goes: one for you, one for me, as they watch a movie together.

A typical couple's date night? Not quite. Cook is a 41-year-old quadriplegic, and Minnie is a 5-pound, 15-inch-high capuchin monkey.

Eleven years ago, life was very good for Craig Cook. The handsome former college quarterback was earning a top salary as a design engineer. He owned two homes—one in Orange County, California, and another in Bullhead City, Arizona, where he, his fiancée and her five-year-old son spent weekends riding their Wave-Runners on Lake Mohave. Cook was an adrenaline junkie who loved motorcycles, dirt bikes and his brand-new Camaro convertible. "That was my dream car, a real show-boater and fully loaded with horsepower," Cook says.

Tragically, Cook was a passenger in that car on a warm evening in January 1996, when life as he knew it came to



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an end. An out-of-town office colleague had begged Cook to let him drive the Camaro with the top down. Not used to California's cloverleaf interchanges, he took the ramp too fast and, just as Cook warned him to slow down, careened over the edge. The car plummeted 50 feet and rolled once. At six-foot-three, Cook, wearing his seat belt, took the full weight of the convertible on his head.

DOCTORS at the Western Medical Center trauma hospital in Santa Ana told him he'd broken his neck. His C5 vertebra—at the same level as his Adam's apple—had shattered with such force, shards of bone were driven into his spinal cord. (Amazingly, the driver walked away physically unharmed.) "If we don't operate, you will die," a doctor told the barely conscious Cook. The ten-hour surgery saved his life but could not restore his mobility. He was paralyzed from the neck down.

When Cook came to, he could see that his fiancée was holding his hand, but he couldn't feel it. His doctors told him if he worked hard at physical therapy, he might get some movement back in his shoulders. In denial, Cook told himself he would walk again.

Two months later, reality flooded in. His physical therapist placed a tray with a small LEGO block on one side of it on a chest-high table in front of Cook. "See if you can move that to the other side of the tray," she told him. "I'll check on you later."

He'd regained a bit of mobility in

his right shoulder by then, though his hands were still useless. "I gave it everything I had," says Cook, "and all I could do was move it a few inches. It took half an hour and two breaks. I was covered in sweat." He broke down and bawled.

"I just lost it," says Cook. "I had been thinking I'd get better. I cried all day and kept shouting at my legs, 'Move, damn you, move!'"

It was the first of many losses. Unable to return to work, he was forced to give up his comfortable lifestyle, including the two homes he loved. Eventually, his fiancée and her child also moved on. "That boy was a surrogate son to me," says Cook. "I taught him to tie his shoes. He called me Dad. My darkest moment was when they left." He contemplated killing himself, but the accident had robbed him of the ability to act on the impulse.

In retrospect, Cook sees their departure as a lifesaver. "It forced me to become independent," he says. He started by addressing his basic needs. He had the house he now lives in gutted and made wheelchair accessible. He hired a caregiver to help him get out of bed and going each morning, a process that can take up to three hours. And, after regaining movement in a few fingers, he taught himself how to steer his electric wheelchair.

Still, he occasionally suffered crying jags and bouts of depression. To help combat his isolation, he joined a support group, but he stopped going to meetings after they left him emotionally drained.

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Pupils at Monkey College



Capuchins learn to care for their keepers at Monkey U—and get TLC too. Clockwise from top: Instructor Alison Payne, using a laser pointer, shows Webster how to operate a CD player; Sadie gets a bath; and Ayla puts a water bottle in a microwave.

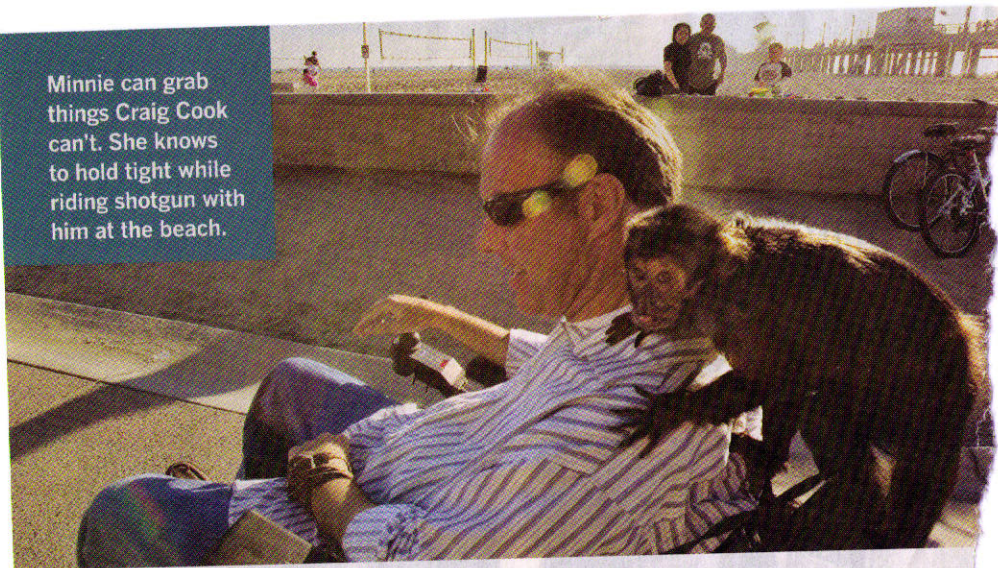


About the same time, a friend began looking into companion animals for Cook and stumbled onto the website for a program called Helping Hands, which trains capuchin monkeys—once used by organ grinders—as service animals for the disabled. At the organization's Monkey College in Boston, the little black-and-brown primates, with punk-rocker hair tufts, learn an array of tasks in simulated apartments full of adaptive equipment for the disabled. The most intelligent of the small monkeys, capuchins are

extremely dexterous and can use their humanlike hands to manipulate objects. Like much bigger chimps, they have very strong arms.

Minnie, for example, can pick up a frozen dinner weighing two pounds, nearly half her weight. Grasping it in one hand, she climbs onto Cook in his wheelchair and, from his shoulder, places it into the wall-mounted

Minnie can grab things Craig Cook can't. She knows to hold tight while riding shotgun with him at the beach.



microwave. Or she can grab a jar of pasta sauce, open it and pour it over precooked noodles.

During the two-year course at Monkey College, the student primates are trained to respond to laser pointers and to simple commands such as *fetch*. They learn how to switch lights on and off, open a bottle and put a straw in it, operate a microwave, and serve food, even feeding their owners with spoons. They don't actually cook and can't use a stove, but when lunch or dinner is over, like live-in maids, they stash the trash. They can switch a TV or computer on, select a CD or DVD and push it into the slot, turn the pages of a book, scratch an itch and brush hair. Opening and closing drawers and turning faucets on and off must all be mastered before they graduate.

When Cook applied to Helping Hands in 2001, it was illegal to have an exotic animal in a home in California. The only helper animals allowed

were dogs for the visually impaired. Helping Hands went to work to have the laws changed for Cook, and in 2004, he became the first person in the state to receive a service monkey.

At first, Cook found it hard not to view Minnie as a pet. But that changed one day when he dropped his cell phone—his lifeline—and Minnie, who responds to about 30 spoken English words, picked it up for him. "In the past," says Cook, "all I could do when that happened was wait for the mailman to arrive and help me."

Of course, Cook still relies on his morning caretaker, friends and family to assist him with tasks Minnie can't handle, such as getting dressed, writing checks and shopping for groceries. But, he says, "the longer I'm around Minnie, the more I realize it's like having a little human coming to live here." Indeed, a framed photo of the monkey on Cook's mantelpiece reads "Daddy's Little Princess." Min-

nie even has many childlike facial expressions. She giggles, frowns and sticks her tongue out in concentration when opening a jar with a snug top.

And like a child, she can also be sneaky. Minnie has been known to shimmy up the shelves of an unguarded pantry, grab the peanut butter, run with it to her cage and slam the door behind her. "She'll hide the jar under her blanket so she can eat it later," laughs Cook. "Or I'll find her with peanut butter smeared around her mouth, licking her hands as fast as possible. She'll have a look on her face that says, I didn't do it."

Now 25, Minnie was originally placed with another Helping Hands client, who became too sick to care for her. She was then reassigned to Cook, as capuchins live an average of 40 years—four times the life span of a Seeing Eye dog.

HELPING HANDS began in 1979 as an experimental project at Tufts University, combining rehabilitation engineering, occupational therapy and behavioral psychology. Initially, the monkeys were rescued from animal labs. Today, the program has its own breeding colony at Southwick's Zoo in Mendon, Massachusetts. For their first five years, the capuchins live with nondisabled foster families so they can enjoy a childhood complete with toys and tummy kisses, and interact socially with humans and household pets. In the foster homes and at Monkey College, they learn

MONKEY DO

that large white dots mean "Don't touch." And round stickers are placed in doorways or on stoves to keep the monkeys away. "We don't want people to lose their heirloom china just because they have a monkey helper," says Helping Hands cofounder Judi Zazula.

Training, supplies and lifetime care for a capuchin can cost \$35,000, but Helping Hands monkeys are provided to approved clients for free. So far, Helping Hands has made 116 pairings for clients like Cook and others with mobility-limiting conditions such as Lou Gehrig's disease, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis and stroke.

Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act, Minnie can go pretty much anywhere Cook does. At restaurants, "she gets me good tables," he quips.

Cook also credits Minnie with helping him hook up with his girlfriend of nearly a year, Chelle Corr, a 43-year-old event planner. "A friend placed an ad for me on an online dating service: 'Man in wheelchair and his monkey looking for Jane,'" says Cook. "And Chelle replied." When Minnie first met her in person, she greeted her with a tiny monkey high-five. "She has always been the ultimate chick magnet," Cook laughs.

Minnie is good at reading moods too. When Cook is down, she strokes his eyebrows, face and head. "We share a bond," Cook says. "She got me out of my depression over being in a wheelchair. Once Minnie arrived, I never looked back." ■