



COHESION & COMMUNITY

Eye of the Beholder

It's been a long road getting from there to here.



by Victoria Thomas · April 17, 2025 · 7 mins read



Mobilitydog's 2024 "Poodle Palooza," complete with No Limits climbing wall. Photo: Janie Heinrich

Lookism, like ableism, is a word that would have our grandparents scratching their heads.

Not that they wouldn't understand what it describes. Of course they did: pretty people always have advantages. Even in the animal kingdom, t

Accessibility

best tail feather display or the widest antler rack frequently secures prime mating privileges, and occasionally social dominance, for their owner.

Science suggests that there are practical reasons for our seemingly innate preferences. Bilateral symmetry, for instance, appeals because this often corresponds to fertility. The Golden Mean, where facial and physical features conform to the 1.618 ratio — more or less a pleasing 2-to-1 balance between all of the features — telegraphs overall health, and therefore desirability for successful procreation.

It's conceivable, therefore, that on the most primitive limbic level, xenophobic humans as nomadic hunter-gatherers would shun those who did not conform to their version of attractiveness. On a practical level, injuries, deformities and disfigurements would compromise the ability of a clan or tribe to stay mobile and respond to threats. Without knowledge of disease or genetics, our ancestors may also have believed that disability is contagious, and may portend of bad, and even worse *juju* to come.

And it must be said that the current climate of American politics continues to amplify stigmatization and “othering.” On April 16th, Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. stated at a press conference, “Autism destroys families, and more importantly, it destroys our greatest resource, which is our children. These are children who should not be suffering like this,” he said. “These are kids who will never pay taxes. They’ll never hold a job. They’ll never play baseball. They’ll never write a poem. They’ll never go out on a date. Many of them will never use a toilet unassisted.”

These inaccurate remarks are just the latest from the guy who claimed that vaccines cause autism, the neurological spectrum he labels an “epidemic.”

But a couple of Pasadenans, separately and together, devote themselves to the idea that maybe different isn't so dangerous after all.



David, who is disabled, with his sisters Alison and Grey Isaacman. Photo: Scott Gutentag

Janie Lynn Heinrich, Executive Director of all-volunteer nonprofit [MobilityDog](#), changes the lives of disabled people, one dog at a time. [Scott Gutentag](#) is a gifted photographer and licensed educational psychologist who creates images of disabled people and dedicates himself to helping those who Janie Heinrich calls “T.A.B.”s — Temporarily Abled

Bodies — to better understand those who are formed differently.

These two will join forces on May 3rd, when MobilityDog presents “A.R.F. 2025,” short for Accessibility Resource Fair.

At Pasadena City Hall, specially trained service dog teams and their trainers, along with puppies and puppy trainers, will be front and center.

The event will feature a No-Limit Adaptive Climbing Wall; hand-powered trikes from [RAMP](#) to ride; live entertainment from a wheelchair-dance squad founded by Paralympian Chelsie Hill, [The Rollettes](#); the international musical group of “challenged” performers known as the [Can Do Musos](#); artwork by [The Pushrim Foundation](#), representatives from Easter Seals and Rancho Los Amigos, food and ice cream trucks, and family fun for all.

Scott Gutentag will be there as well, prowling the grounds, taking photographs of the event.

Let's begin with what might seem amusing to some: the Standard Poodle. The American Kennel Club describes this breed as one of dogdom's "true aristocrats...beneath the curly, low-allergen coat is an elegant athlete and companion."

Many consider their prissy pom-pom coiffure contrived. And it is, in the sense that their shaved bodies and strategically groomed poufs were confected to enable their mobility and buoyancy in water as retrievers. The snowball-puffs were originally intended to keep the dog's joints warm in icy plunges.

And while it may be difficult to picture a fleecy, topknotted pooch named *Monsieur Fancy Pants* as a hunter, the breed was developed to snatch downed ducks. Shucks, the English breed-name arises from the German "*pudel*," "*pudelin*," meaning to splash in a puddle. In French, the breed is called "*Caniche*" or "duck dog."

Perhaps surprisingly, Standard Poodles top Heinrich's list as the ideal service dog breed.

"We choose the dogs based on temperament. Poodles are analytical thinkers," she says. "They are curious by nature, and so intelligent. I love the canine spirit, and so I let dogs be dogs. If you let a Poodle develop their personality,



Janie Heinrich, founder of the nonprofit MobilityDog.org
Photo: Janie Heinrich

they will learn to combine commands, two, three, four, or five commands together into compound actions to serve our needs. They love to please.”

Her own dog, Beckett, is now a dapper senior at age 7½. Heinrich says that Poodles work effectively as service dogs until the age of 10 or 11. “If I start to fall, he’s always under me,” she says.

A couple of Golden Doodles are also in her current training mix.

Service dogs used for individuals using wheelchairs, canes, crutches and walkers differ in purpose and technique from the guide dogs used by blind people. She says, “A guide dog must lead, because their human can’t see. But a service dog stays by your side, generally, rather than going out in front.”

To date, MobilityDog has matched 42 teams of dog and “Forever Handler,” the human in need of canine support.

Heinrich says that her team initially tried training rescue dogs for service work versus obtaining dogs from breeders, but the rescues proved unreliable in temperament. “I love all rescues,” she says, “They make the best pets. But they come with baggage.”

MobilityDog’s education arm, PAWS, visits the classrooms of students from kindergarten through college-level. A counterpart initiative called WAGS visits businesses and other work settings.

The PAWS program engages students through the making of visual art, short projects like finger-puppets and flip-books around ideas including compassion and integrity. Regarding PAWS, Heinrich says, “Children are amazing. They’ll just come over and ask me, ‘Why did this happen to you?’ I tell them my spine is like an electrical cord that got a kink in it. And once in a while, I still get a spark.”

Heinrich explains that a crate hit her in a grocery store, a mishap that damaged her spine. She reports that four agencies rejected her request for a service dog on the basis of her age, which was past 55. “They were giving me an expiration date,” she chuckles. “Basically, if you’re between the ages of 17 and 30, you won’t get a service dog because they think you’re too young and therefore irresponsible. And if you’re over 50 or 55, they determine that you’re too old. They figure that you may not live much longer, and they don’t want to have to rehome their highly specialized dogs.”

Her response was to found MobilityDog in 2018.

Heinrich casts a gimlet eye over workplace pushback around hiring and promoting people with disabilities. While the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA) was signed into law in 1990, she says, “It isn’t consistently enforced. A lot of people make the excuse that it’s too expensive. There are costs involved with retrofitting a space, for example, but there are always workable alterations and accommodations.”

. . .

In a world obsessed with camera-ready prettiness, [Scott Gutentag goes deeper](#). He photographs T.A.B.s and their events as well as creating portraits of the disabled, and in every case, his eye registers subtext that a casual shutterbug might capture only by accident.

Do some neurotypicals recoil from his sometimes-haunting images the same way they recoil from disabled people in real life?

Gutentag says, “Those with very severe intellectual disabilities may have dysmorphic features that the general population may not be used to and can be shocked by, which further reinforces the seclusion and motivation to ‘hide’ these people. Thus, the need for photography to help include and inform. The



Photographer Scott Gutentag connects almost empathically with his diverse subjects, including Mary Ischik. Photo: Scott Gutentag

facial structure, tongue, eyes, and expressions of some of my clients may be distorted and include different physical features from those typically seen in photos, TV, movies, and advertising.”

“This is precisely why we need to include all human beings in photography and remind everyone we all belong to the human race, no matter how one

looks, feels, moves, etc.,” says Gutentag. “For those with disabilities that can’t be ‘seen,’ photography can help the general population see what they can contribute to the world instead of those who just need to be taken care of. For instance, words of wisdom they can share, how they enjoy life, types of jobs they have, kindness to people and animals. The neurotypical population can learn just as much from those with disabilities as vice versa.”

And maybe more.

On May 17th, the award-winning documentary film about his work, “[Disability in Focus](#),” will be featured as part of the [Believe Psychology Film Festival](#) at The Cat’s Crawl in Hollywood.

He has recently photographed professional models with disabilities for the [Bold Beauty Project](#), a nonprofit dedicated to



George Platt’s a dapper dude with style — and disability. Photo: Scott Gutentag

creating social change in how atypical people are perceived and represented. The models and their photographs will be [celebrated](#) at the UCLA Kerckhoff Coffee House Patio in Westwood on Sunday, May 18th.

On May 30, he will serve as photographer for the [Exceptional Kids Organization](#) 2025 Prom for young adults with disabilities. This year's theme: Mardi Gras Masquerade.

Gutentag says, "Super fun! When photographing the annual special needs Prom, adults with a range of disabilities are dancing, laughing, and chatting. They are authentic, their true selves, not trying to hide anything about themselves, and have a fantastic time without alcohol or drugs. The 'typical' population can learn from this healthy way of living."

Heinrich advises, "Stop taking a wide berth around people who are different from you. All people want to do is be heard, to talk, and be listened to. They want you to know their story, and that includes everybody."



m Okamoto, who has Down syndrome. Photo: Scott tentag

For T.A.B.s with (mostly)-still-working parts, she says, "Lots of people think what we're doing is nice, but it doesn't really get to them until they themselves are affected, or someone they love becomes disabled." She adds that the aging process itself can derail a body and mind that had otherwise been in perfect working order for decades.

As part of the solution, the A.R.F. 2025! event will provide a comfortable setting for people from all walks — and wheelchair-rolls — of life to encounter one

another and share a spring afternoon of inclusive activities, the contact sweetened by that slobbery, tail-thumping, universal solvent: puppy-love.

To end on a cautionary tale, in her recent post-fire encounters, Heinrich says that many disabled survivors have asked in rhetorical distress why someone didn't come to save them. The A.R.F. 2025! event will include a FEMA workshop to address evacuation readiness and safety solutions for all.

Mobilitydog also offers regular ongoing classes in emergency and disaster preparedness for the disabled, as the ultimate assertion of their potential — and what Heinrich calls “FUN”ctional — independence.

• • •

DEETS

- Accessibility Resource Fair – A.R.F. 2025!
- Saturday, May 3, 11:30 AM – 3:30 PM
- Pasadena City Hall, 100 North Garfield Street, Pasadena 91105
- www.mobilitydog.org

The short URL of this article is: <https://localnewspasadena.com/g5y3>



Victoria Thomas

Victoria has been a journalist since her college years when she wrote for Rolling Stone and CREEM. She is the recipient of a Southern California Journalism Award for feature writing. Victoria describes the view of Mt. Wilson from her front step as “staggering,” and she is a defender of peacocks everywhere.

Email: victoriat@localnewspasadena.com

7 COMMENTS

Scott Gutentag

April 24, 2025 at 8:02 am

Wonderful literary article that is thoughtful, informative, and educational, which weaves together multiple concepts of disability and inclusion. Thank you Victoria for beautifully incorporating the work done by Janie and myself in the area of disabilities!

Loading...

Reply

Art Blaser

April 22, 2025 at 2:28 pm

A wonderful article highlighting the value of life with a disability and a supportive society. Assistance dogs (I'm privileged to be one of Mobility Dogs' handlers) exemplify the trend toward disability acceptance, a more promising future than counterproductive attempts to "fix" disability.

Loading...

Reply

janielynnheinrich

April 20, 2025 at 7:54 am

Victoria captured the essence of Scott's and my work with grace and clarity. Her ability to truly listen, reflect, and then share our mission so beautifully is a rare gift. She honored our vision with words that felt both powerful and authentic. I am deeply grateful.

Loading...

Reply

janielynnheinrich

April 23, 2025 at 8:39 am

"TAB" — Temporarily Able-Bodied — is a simple, powerful reminder that ability can change in an instant. Carlos Benavides shared this

insight with MobilityDog.Org, and it stuck. Thank you, Carlos, for the brilliant perspective shift.

Let's build a world that works for everyone, not just for the moment we're "able." Grateful, Janie Heinrich -Founder MobilityDog.Org

Loading...

Reply

Cindy

April 19, 2025 at 4:03 pm

I so appreciate this informative and inspirational article. It not only reminds us of the good in humanity but in the need to understand what our fellow humans need from all of us both physically and psychologically. Thanks for shedding light on those needs and how we can get involved.

Loading...

Reply

Pamela H Allen

April 18, 2025 at 2:31 pm

Fabulous article on this oh-so-crucial topic! Beautiful writing, Ms. Thomas. Thank you!

Loading...

Reply

Robin Collins

April 18, 2025 at 4:21 am

Thank you for this fine piece of writing which gives us all a clearer, closer, kinder view of one of SoCal's most beautiful communities.

Loading...

Reply

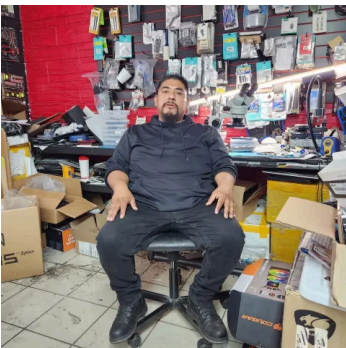
Leave a comment! FYI, comments are moderated and close 90 days after the news item's publication date.

Write a comment...

Comment

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN



April 24, 2025

**Pomona
Community to
Border Patrol:
Where's our
barber?**



April 23, 2025

**The Omega Sci-Fi
Project Celebrates
Young Writers**



April 23, 2025

**Some of Google's
\$15 Million Fire
Relief Initiative to
Reach Local
Students**



April 22, 2025

**AmeriCorps NCCC
and FEMA Corps
Volunteers Won't be
Assigned to
Altadena...or
Anywhere Else**

LATEST FROM COHESION & COMMUNITY



The Secret Life of Stuff

Our troubles are not in our stuff, but in ourselves.



Eaton Fire Collaborative Goes Public at the Rose Bowl

New community organization trying to unite efforts for recovery and rebuilding.



Prom On, With Dignity

Alice's Kids nonprofit underwrites Pasadena High Schools' Prom Night.



Silent Sundays

Janet Grey's haunting images of Altadena's chimneys revealed by the Eaton Fire.



An Outrage in the Name of National Security, on Exhibit at Descanso Gardens

Livelihoods and civil liberties were surrendered at Tuna Canyon Detention Station.

NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

You may opt out at any time, and we will never share your information with anyone...ever!

First name or full name

Email

☐ By continuing, you accept the privacy policy

SUBSCRIBE



COPYRIGHT © PASADENA MEDIA FOUNDATION 2025, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
Local News Pasadena is a publication of the Pasadena Media Foundation, a 501(c)3 tax-exempt journalism nonprofit.

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) [LOGOUT](#) [NEWSLETTER ARCHIVE](#)
[ABOUT](#) [CONTACT US](#)

LOCAL NEWS PASADENA IS MADE POSSIBLE BY READERS LIKE YOU AND:



PEN America



California Association of Realtors



Los Angeles County Department of Economic Opportunity

RANDOM READS



AmeriCorps NCCC and FEMA Corps Volunteers Won't be Assigned to Altadena... or Anywhere Else
April 22, 2025



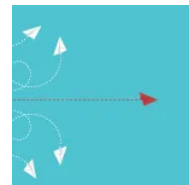
Institute for
Nonprofit
News



Pasadena
Media
Foundation



Los Angeles
Press Club



**What
We
Cover
is
Who
We
Are**

January
16, 2025



**Prom
On,
With
Digni
ty**

March
17, 2025



**'You'r
e My
Home
,**

February
9, 2025