



Before Leska first got her service dog in February 2010, she seldom left the house and was dealing with myriad autism medical conditions. "When I first got Orka I was just trying to stay alive. I needed a really big, strong dog because I was having trouble walking and doing anything." Over the past two years, Leska's health has dramatically improved and now Orka helps keep her mobile. "He helps me with balance, maneuvering, navigating and transitions."



Above: Leska and Orka go swimming. Leska is a proponent of service dogs for autistic individuals, but warns that training is a monumental commitment and has to be done to meet specific needs. "Your dog will give you what people will never give you. The service dog will give you love, cheer, comfort, loyalty, understanding, some kind of intuitive knowledge that you need help and that you need tasks done, and unconditional gladness to see you and be with you. In every way people fail, the dog succeeds."

Below: Leska met her guru, Sri Sri Paramahansa Yogananda, in 1980. He is the most important overwhelmingly prominent subject and influence in her life. For a period of time, Leska wanted to be a nun. Her house is graced with many framed pictures of Yogananda, though the majority of the more than 370 framed pictures she owns are still wrapped in boxes. "The guru is the dispeller of darkness and the engine God appoints to lead one to salvation," says Leska, explaining her relationship. "He's your best friend, the most encouraging support, completely in tune with truth, full of humor, extremely eager to help and very, very wise."



Left: Though Leska moved into her house in August 2005, one room remains unpacked. "Our family room I have not yet unpacked. It's just a matter of making the time to start unpacking those boxes. For years I was so freaked out, horrified, shocked and grieving about my ex-husband that I could not open those boxes and have those memories."



"I had a huge amount of bullying and criticism my whole life and it made me want to avoid people. I am really enthusiastic. I'm full of love and joy and people are a stone wall that gave back constant criticism. With Orka, there's none of that; people are focused on him so there's no trouble."



Leska and Lynn relax in costume at a Newfoundland Halloween party. Leska lives with Lynn Szender, her friend, boss and domestic partner, whom she has known since 1989. The two were brought together after mutual marital tragedy. Leska says the relationship works because Lynn is half-aspie herself. "It's a very comfortable, easy relationship in some ways because I don't have to explain myself; Lynn just understands."



While waiting for a meal, Leska concentrates on her iPhone while Lynn waits. In 1980, Leska started following Steve Jobs and Apple and developed a gleeful obsession. "The minute I saw Steve, I knew that he was an extraordinary human being, and I was thrilled with joy, recognition of excellence and marveling he walked the Earth."



"Persons with Asperger's have hidden goldmines of talent, and when you make fun of them, you do yourself a disservice."

### Photos by Leah Nash

Below: Leska says the Newfoundland breed is the perfect match for her service dog needs because of his size, intelligence and water rescue capabilities. "When I first got him, I couldn't kayak, I couldn't do anything, I was really sick. But what motivates me to try and get better? I love to kayak so it's like, 'Oh, I could just croak, but is there anything worth living for on Earth? Well, kayaking.' So that's the one thing that motivates me to keep trying to be alive here."

Though she was married for 19 years to a man she loved, Leska remains a virgin at age 51. Partly due to sensory issues from Asperger's, adherence to her spiritual path, and also due to a lifetime of nursing care giving, Leska is celibate. "I have never been in the least bit interested in sex," she says. "When I met my husband, we met at church. I wanted to be a nun and he wanted to be a monk. Our guru emphatically explains that sex is a downfall, a detriment to the spiritual path. I am not going to jeopardize my spiritual life which fills me with such relished bliss."

"Asperger's has real blessings. I am not focused on what most people seem to be focused on. I live a very interior life and it's filled with joy. I have insatiable curiosity about things."

