

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

ONLINE PRINT EDITION

Published January 18, 2007

## Ill woman's service dog has ailments of his own

By Maura J. Halpern  
The Arizona Republic

Karen Morin keeps her medical history folded up inside a kitchen drawer.

The four-page, single-spaced document lists all 48 of her surgeries - 49 if you count the hernia operation she had last month.

Since then, eating has been difficult for Morin, whose petite body disappears behind plaid shirts and sweat pants.

But that's just the latest struggle. It also comes on top of another challenge: Morin's service dog, who is virtually the key to her existence, is facing health problems of his own.

More than 30 procedures on the surgery list relate to her temporomandibular joint, or TMJ. The TMJ connects the lower jawbone to the skull and makes it possible to chew, swallow, make facial expressions and speak.

For more than two decades, those tasks have been a challenge for the Glendale resident.

Morin's life changed after a string of surgeries in the late 1980s to correct a congenital jaw deformity.

Surgeons inserted synthetic devices such as Dow Silastic discs and Vitek Proplast-Teflon implants.

Instead of fixing the problem, the implants left the 43-year-old permanently disabled.

The Vitek device, recalled by the Food and Drug Administration around the same time as Morin's surgery, disintegrated and sent toxic particles throughout her body, triggering severe immune-system reactions.



Karen Morin, 42, of Glendale, lays in her hospital bed at Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center in Phoenix December 13, 2006. Morin became disabled after she received jaw implants that contained dangerous toxic components which were later recalled. Karen had a severe immune reaction to these components and suffered nerve and muscle damage including seizures. She is now fully disabled and has a service dog named Woody to help her.

(Emmanuel Lozano/The Republic)

The particles were absorbed into her bloodstream, which caused permanent nerve damage, epileptic seizures, muscle weakness, joint pains, difficulty thinking and other problems.

"My entire life plummeted," Morin said.

For the past 12 years, she has lived with her retired parents, Joanne and Robert Morin. She tried living on her own but would call her parents in the middle of the night.

"It's difficult for her to be independent because of her seizures," Robert said. "We felt much more comfortable with her here."

Watching their only daughter live in pain has been devastating for Karen's parents.

"She has an inner strength," Joanne said. "I'm not sure I could do it."

Karen was engaged once, in her 20s, but her fiance couldn't cope with her health problems. She hasn't been on a date in several years.

"I see my brothers get married and start families," Karen said.

"I don't think I'll ever have that."

## **Lifesaving dog**

In 2000, she received a service dog, a German shepherd named Amando, to warn her before she has a seizure.

Karen uses a matter-of-fact tone as she discusses her lifelong health problems, which began long before the implant nightmares.

At age 3, she was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis and had an ileostomy when she was 10, in which doctors removed her colon and rectum.

Karen also underwent a hysterectomy from an unrelated illness when she was 27.

It isn't until she talks about Amando that her demeanor shifts and her eyes well with tears.

Last spring, Karen had to put the dog to sleep because of bone-marrow complications.

"He was my entire world," she said. "It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do."



Morin's service dog Woody, who is virtually the key to her existence, is facing health problems of his own. The dog has developed serious allergies that require shots and regular grooming.  
(Emmanuel Lozano/The Republic)

Woody, Karen's new 2-year-old service dog, arrived from the Czech Republic about a week before Amando died.

Even before he had his seizure training, Woody helped save Karen's life when she blacked out from a seizure during the week before Amando died.

"It was like a piece of Amando's soul went into Woody," she said. "Amando knew I'd be taken care of."

## Funds running low

Karen's parents have paid for Woody's veterinary care, but their funds are running out and the dog has developed serious allergies that require shots and regular grooming.

"Woody has to have his allergies treated or else it will affect his job as a seizure dog," Karen said. "He's so good at what he does."

Two organizations, Oklahoma-based Orthodox's Silver Lining Foundation and a Glendale Lions Club International group, are working to raise money for Woody's vet bills, future training and equipment, an estimated \$15,000.

"I need Woody. He's everything," Morin said. "I look at him and see this beautiful dog here for me."

## Broken dream

One night in 1996 when she couldn't sleep, Morin drew a skull filled with symbols to describe her lifelong struggle.

She sketched tears, jaw and chin implants, a scalpel, pain pills and money falling out of a bag, among other images.

Morin also drew a spine to represent her aspiration to become a chiropractor. She had to drop out a year and a half before finishing the degree because of her health problems.

A graduation cap and diploma with an "X" through it symbolize her broken dream.



Morin has few friends in the Valley, so the 2-year-old German shepherd is a huge part of her life. "Woody and my family are what keep me going, because I know they love me," she said. "I'm just here in limbo waiting to have my life finally put back together." Karen's parents have paid for Woody's veterinary care, but their funds are running out and the dog has developed serious allergies that require shots and regular grooming. "Woody has to have his allergies treated or else it will affect his job as a seizure dog," Karen said. (Emmanuel Lozano/The Republic)

At the top of the skull, Morin connected two clouds with a rainbow. On one end, she drew a wishbone and wrote "HELP!"

On the other cloud, she drew a pot of gold with the words "good healthy life" across the front.

More than a decade later, she still wishes for some relief.

In 2001, Morin received titanium TMJ implants, but those metal plates started to wear down and shift last year.

Now, a minor accident could cause the implants to pierce her ear canal or even her brain.

"I can't go on like this. I don't know what to do," she said.

As she battles with her insurance company to approve surgery for new metal implants, she tries to focus on Woody.

Morin has few friends in the Valley, so the German shepherd is a huge part of her life.

"Woody and my family are what keep me going, because I know they love me," she said.

"I'm just here in limbo waiting to have my life finally put back together."