

# GIDGET—A GIANT HOLLYWOOD STAR IN A TINY PACKAGE



It seemed like any other day in LA for animal actor trainer, Sue Chipperton. Navigating the slow moving LA traffic, she was on her way to a dog breeder's house in a quest to find a West Highland White Terrier to be cast in a food commercial. Scouting for dogs to be cast in movies and commercials is Chipperton's profession and the knack to spotting a potential animal actor is a big part of her job at California's *Animal Services Studio*.

Potential stars come in all kinds of packages and many of Animal Services' established and rising stars are found at local shelters, rescue groups or through breeders. Chipperton's trained eye has learned to spot potential through the 'behaviours' each animal exhibits. It's from these behaviours that skills and tricks can be built on for an animal to perform within a studio environment.

But it wasn't a Westie that caught Chipperton's eye that day. Instead it was a tiny little Chihuahua puppy that was to be known as Gidget or the Taco Bell Dog.

*A Famous Dog's Life* chronicles Chipperton's experience as a Hollywood animal trainer and her most famous talent—Gidget, the 5.5 kilo dog that became an overnight celebrity. Part bio, part Hollywood tell-all and part training manual, this book captures the talent, patience and humour needed to work on set in Hollywood—for the trainer and the animal.

Urban Animal took some of Sue Chipperton's time away from training to ask a few questions about the book, Gidget and her training methods.

**UA** *Gidget was obviously a very famous dog in America. With the catch phrase of Yo quiero Taco Bell!* ("I want Taco Bell!" or "I love Taco Bell!"). Did you realise at the time she would become so famous?

**SC** No, I had no idea. Gidget was originally cast in the shivering Chihuahua 'girlfriend' dog of the main dog. But a few days before the dogs were due on set, the director decided to switch the roles. Within a month or so, the Taco Bell commercial was on air. Within a few days people were asking if that was the dog on the Taco Bell commercial.



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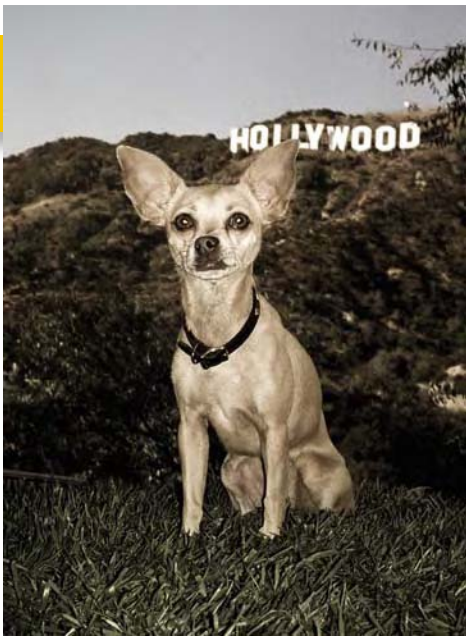
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Photos L to R: Gidget under the Hollywood sign.  
Sue on the set for Advantix  
All photos: Sue Chipperton

**UA** So from there it snowballed?

**SC** Yes. A few weeks later we got the call that Taco Bell wanted to do a whole series of commercials down in Miami.

**UA** So what is the special X-Factor you look for in an animal actor, especially dogs?

**SC** There are lots of trainers here in Hollywood, and each has their own different take on what they're looking for. Some will look for that quiet and calm dog.

For me, I would rather have that rambunctious, outgoing and obnoxious dog there is. And with training, they're not going to worry about noise, or worry about what's going on around them. When I do into a shelter situation where it's always chaotic and there's lots of noise going on, I look for a dog who isn't bothered by that.

**UA** Do you get many people offering their own dog or cat to be a screen star.

**SC** Yes but it's a real skill for an animal to be able to execute a 'behaviour', and then execute it while so much is happening on set. A set is a stressful and noisy environment. There can be booms overhead, boxes dropping, loud noises and lights. And then the animal is expected to do the behaviour many times over to get all the different shots.

There are some exceptions. One time we had a scene in Million Dollar Baby and Hillary Swank's character is driving in a car with a dog beside her. She requested that it be her dog. For something so simple, that was easy—a no brainer.

**UA** If there has been one simple thing that Gidget has taught you, what would that be?

**SC** She actually taught me about small dogs, because before I met her I had only trained larger dogs. She also taught me that even being a small dog and quite delicate, I could treat her just like other dogs. In a studio situation with so many people and trying to navigate your way through crowds, this little dog can still walk on all four feet. There is no need and no benefit to the dog to carry her or lift her up all the time. She taught me that she could have a confident attitude without having to place her on set. Instead we made sure she could walk to her own mark. So there was no "I'm so tiny and delicate," attitude from her.

Sue Chipperton started her career in Florida working with dolphins, and has been a studio animal trainer for nearly two decades. [www.afamousdogslife.com](http://www.afamousdogslife.com) Rennie Dyball is a *People* magazine writer and co-author of Christian Siriano's *Fierce Style*.



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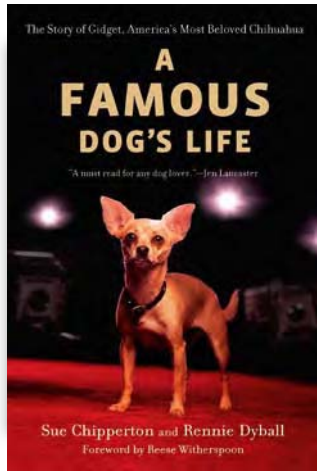
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# A FAMOUS DOG'S LIFE

FORWARD BY REECE WITHERSPOON

When someone walks up to you with a dog, the whole energy of your encounter changes. Immediately, everyone smiles. And everyone draws closer to one another in relating to the dog. I feel blessed to have had many wonderful animals in my life—and some of the most extraordinary one I've met through my job.

I remember when I first read the script for *Legally Blonde*, I thought, *Oh my gosh, my co-star is a canine. I hope he's awesome!* I had worked with Rhodesian ridgebacks on a movie I did in Africa, and it was a really positive experience. But the dog in this script had *character*. He had action scenes, visual jokes, and the two of us practically had dialogue. For the movie to work, we had to have an incredible animal trainer and an amazing dog.

When I heard that our trainer on the movie, Sue Chipperton, had also trained the Chihuahua in the Taco Bell commercial, I got really excited. My family and I loved those commercials. They were just so clever and hysterical. And when Sue introduced



Reece Witherspoon & Bruiser (Moonie) at the Reece Witherspoon Hollywood Walk of Fame Star Ceremony

me to Moonie, who played Bruiser, I knew we were going to have a blast. He was this very, very tiny, *very* high-energy boy who was incredibly smart, well trained, and ready to go.

Certain dogs just *love* to work. They're natural performers. They're focused, and they love the attention and the focus that's on them. Moonie was that kind of dog.

And so was Gidget, the Taco Bell Chihuahua herself, who also worked on *Legally Blonde*. She was bigger than Moonie and *all ears*—she literally had gigantic satellites for ears! She was also gentler than Moonie, and incredibly special. Whenever she came on set, everyone would end up gathered around her. Gidget was just magical.

All of my experiences with animals on movies have been uniquely rewarding. In 2010, I shot a movie called *Water for Elephants*, and I got to work with an elephant named Ty. There was so much fascinating, nonverbal communication that went on between him and his trainer. It really reminded me of the way Sue works.

Every animal trainer I've encountered has a lot of respect for Sue because she's so loving and she manages to bring out the best in her animals through praise and positive reinforcement. She has a beautiful, intuitive communication with her dogs, and a huge respect and care for them. It's a pleasure to work with her, because she lets other people love her animals too. She encourages you to connect with them.

Anyone who chooses to work with animals for a living is doing something really special, in my opinion. It's a big commitment to train an animal every day of your life, almost like raising a child. And animal trainers in Hollywood have to be in constant communication with the filmmakers to make sure they get what they need to tell the story, while at the same time respecting the needs of the animals and bringing out their best performances. We're talking about a degree of patience that supersedes the normal person's capacity!

Sue would spend hours working with and encouraging Moonie, and as a result he had tons of tricks—which we were really able to take advantage of in *Legally Blonde 2*. He was given a big character arc, and the audience even finds out that he's gay! In developing the script, I sometimes wondered whether that moment would be hysterically funny or ridiculously absurd. But in the end, it worked, because Moonie had enough personality to support an entire story line that revolved around him.

Before Gidget or Moonie or any dog hits the big time, they have to be "discovered," so to speak. That's where animal trainers like Sue come in. She has a knack for picking extraordinary animals. She can go through a group of dogs and sense immediately which ones will be the best workers and performers.

The dogs who make it in the business are driven. And they're charismatic. When I watch the Westminster dog show, I always think you can tell which dogs have that extra sparkle. They're little stars. Hollywood dogs are the same way. They're such special spirits, it's been my huge privilege to work with them, and with Sue. 🐾

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