

in their
Debt

By Jen Reeder

Spree and Kayla.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CONNIE FREDMAN

SECOND CHANCE LABS

Dogs rescued by Colorado's Safe Harbor Lab Rescue give back to their communities - and adopters.

Not long after Colorado resident Bill Prescott adopted a two-year-old yellow Lab named Avery, he wondered if he'd made a mistake. His wife had recently left him so his personal life was in turmoil, and the energetic dog seemed too smart for her own good.

"She learned how to open up my single-door refrigerator to help herself," he said. "I came home from work one day and she had pulled out a package of hamburger buns, a loaf of bread, a box of margarine, and a tub of sour cream."

After staying up all night to make sure Avery and his other pets didn't get sick – which, miraculously, they didn't – and wrapping a cargo strap around the fridge, Prescott reached out to the nonprofit Safe Harbor Lab Rescue for advice on what to do about the dog he'd adopted from them.

The organization paid for a dog trainer, and Avery transformed into a calm, obedient dog as she learned boundaries while strengthening her bond with Prescott. She even went on to be a registered therapy dog with the nonprofit Alliance of Therapy Dogs, visiting seniors in an assisted living center and helping children in physical rehabilitation at a hospital with their movement exercises.

Because Avery is so gentle with children, they recently started volunteering with a children's literacy program at a local library. During downtime, Prescott enjoys hiking in the mountains with Avery and tossing her a bumper while she swims to retrieve it in alpine lakes. Five years after adopting Avery, he has no regrets about giving a rescue dog a second chance.

"She's so good with people," he said. "I think working with Avery helped me get through the situation and set some goals."

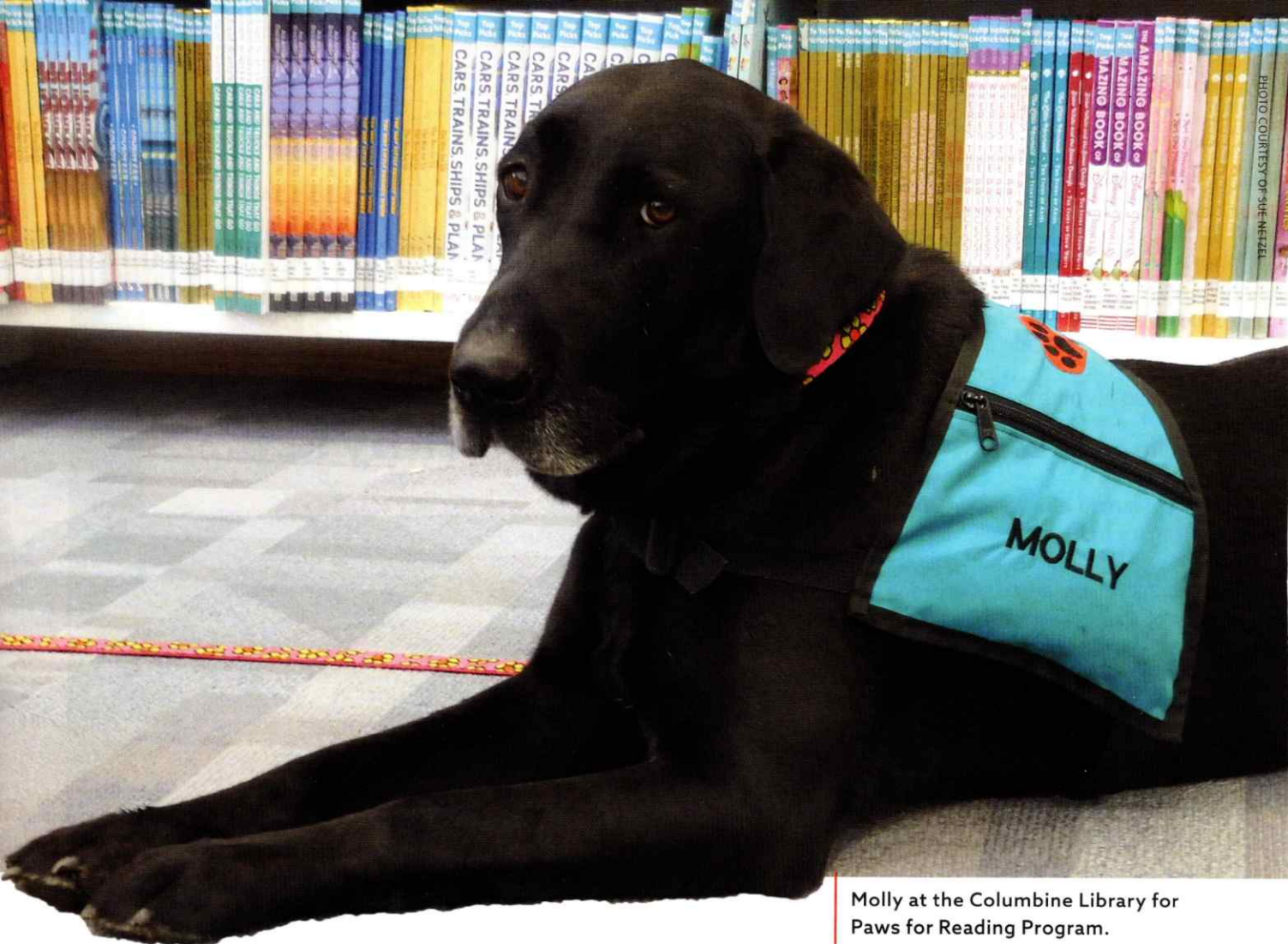
Avery is one of more than 4,300 Labs and Lab-mixes rescued and rehomed by Safe Harbor Lab Rescue since the all-volunteer group started in May of 2002. The Colorado-based nonprofit takes in dogs who are surrendered by their owners or transported from animal shelters and rescue organizations – often in other states.

Occasionally, veterinary hospitals ask the group to save Labs whose owners cannot afford a surgery and are considering euthanizing their pet for economic reasons, according to Jacky Eckard, president of Safe Harbor Lab Rescue. The group also fosters many senior dogs and spends over \$160,000 each year on veterinary bills.

**“
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Avery on Christmas Day, 2021,
in Colorado Canyons Hospital.



Molly at the Columbine Library for Paws for Reading Program.

“So many of these dogs lived outside, they haven’t been fed well, they’ve never had any veterinary care. They’ve been shot – we get some with buckshot in them,” she said. “We’re just on a mission: for Labs to know people love them.”

She and her husband adore their adopted black Lab mix, Petey, who was slated for euthanasia in Texas before Safe Harbor transported him to Colorado six years ago. He’s been a comfort to them during the pandemic.

“He stole our hearts,” she said. “He’s a great pup.”

Some rescued Labs just need space to catch their breath after a traumatic experience, while others need to “run their little hearts out” to burn off stress, Eckard said. The key is to treat each one as an individual and with compassion.

“It’s very inspiring and heartwarming how resilient they are,” she said. “We just want to give them every opportunity to shine.”

A black Lab named Molly found her way to Safe Harbor Lab Rescue in 2015 after her owners divorced. She was so

mellow that her foster, Sue Netzel, thought she might have a medical issue; sure enough, she needed to be treated for parasites. But the Lab stayed laid back, sweet, and easy to please – and the Netzels permanently adopted her.

She’s the couple’s fourth pet Lab and the fifty-sixth dog they’ve fostered for Safe Harbor Lab Rescue.

“Labs are just so kind and loyal,” she said. “They don’t have a mean bone in their body.”

Molly was the “shining star” in her obedience classes, and her trainer suggested she become a therapy dog. She passed the AKC’s Canine Good Citizen test with flying colors and is registered with the nonprofit Animals 4 Therapy.

Now eight years old, the 90-pound Lab has been a hit at a nursing home rehabilitation center, where one resident would eagerly wait for them at the door and gave Molly a Christmas card every year, and at a library’s reading program for children.

A two-year-old boy overcame his fear of dogs thanks to Molly. When his older siblings would read to the large Lab,



Moose
enjoying a walk.

“Labs are just so kind and loyal. They don’t have a mean bone in their body.”

he stayed away; but each visit, he moved a little closer to her blanket.

One day, he’d ventured close enough for Netzel to ask, “Do you want to touch Molly’s ear? It feels like a piece of velvet.”

“He touched her ear with one finger and then it was all over,” she recalled. “He’d come in and hug Molly around the neck and kiss her. And of course, she loved it.”

Connie Fredman likes to foster and adopt dogs from Safe Harbor Lab Rescue with medical issues, like Spree, a yellow Lab-mix with a birth defect that required her front right leg to be amputated when just 13 weeks old; and Moose, a chocolate Lab with osteosarcoma. Moose had a life expectancy of eight months, but he lived another four years.

Both Spree and Moose volunteered as “pen pals” of children and teens with cancer through the nonprofit Youth And Pet Survivors (YAPS), since dogs couldn’t visit the oncology ward at a local children’s hospital because the patients are immunocompromised.

“The younger kids may not realize that it’s not the dog talking to them. The older kids certainly know that – but it’s not a medical thing, it’s not their family. It’s some other outlet, and they can express things they don’t tell anybody else,” Fredman shared.

Moose looked like a big bear and was friends with everyone he met. He loved swimming and just being around people. When he had a 15-year-old pen pal named Bella through YAPS, his cancer returned and he died in about a month. Fredman worried about how to tell Bella but learned she had also died within three weeks of Moose.

“We went to her wake,” she said. “I brought a paw print of his, and they put it in her casket when she got buried.”

While there can be challenges caring for dogs with disabilities and illnesses, Fredman finds it extremely rewarding. Plus, Labs are her favorite breed because they’re so well-rounded and up for anything – whether it’s an outdoor adventure or lounging in front of the TV.

“Labs are the best dogs,” she said. “They really are.” 🐾

For more information, visit: www.safeharborlabrescue.org.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.