

In a Dog's Age



Lisa Waggoner and
Keaton

*The special bond
between people over
65 and their dogs
brings a plethora of
health and
well-being benefits.*

By Jen Reeder

For over 25 years, Lisa Waggoner has shared her home with Australian Shepherds—and she says they're the reason she gets up every day.

The 71-year-old retired dog trainer adores Keaton, the 4-year-old Australian Shepherd she currently shares with her husband, Brad. The couple enjoys the dog's companionship at home in North Carolina and on monthlong road trips in their vintage Volkswagen bus.

"He's just so well-adjusted and social that he loves the life we lead," she says.

Over the years, Waggoner has pursued activities with her dogs based on their proclivities, from agility and therapy dog work to stand-up paddleboarding and dock diving.

"Brad and I never had children. We weren't able to, and they are our four-legged kids," she says. "There's nothing I would not do for them."

She's found spending time with dogs calms her nervous system, and feels dogs are good for seniors since they need exercise and provide companionship and unconditional love—which is "good for all of us."

She's right. Studies show dogs offer

numerous health and wellness benefits, from lowering blood pressure and boosting physical activity to creating a surge of oxytocin—sometimes called the "love hormone"—when we gaze into their eyes.

Just last year, a major [study](#) found dog owners aged 50 and up had slower memory decline than people without pets. That's a compelling reason why we should welcome dogs into our homes as seniors, according to Steven Feldman, president of the nonprofit Human Animal Bond Research Institute in Washington, D.C.

"Especially taken with all the other scientific research that suggests dogs are beneficial for healthy aging that point to reduced cardiovascular disease risk, increased walking and activities of daily living, decreased loneliness and increased social interaction and connection, and improved mood," he notes.

A Life Among Dogs

Wisconsin resident Cornelia Gordon grew up with dogs, and has always felt it's important to have them in her life. The 83-year-old retired college professor—"I'm a little older than Mick Jagger and not



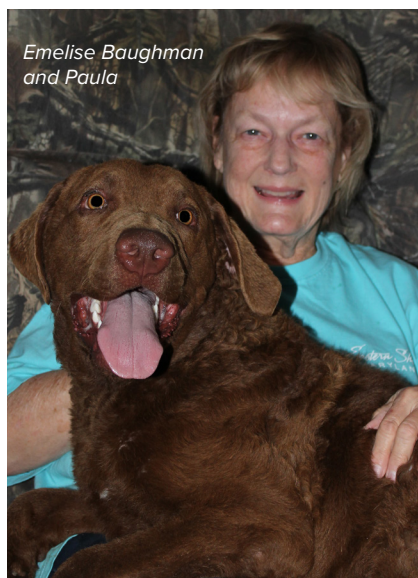
quite as old as Paul McCartney”—lives in her house with Xander, a Large Munsterlander, and Loki, an English Cocker Spaniel.

Her buddies were “really helpful” after her husband died in 2022. Xander was about 5 years old at the time, and she brought home Loki about two months later so Xander would have a companion.

Xander alerts her to any visitors at the door, and Loki sits in her lap to watch TV and lets her know when it’s time to head outside. Both dogs follow her from room to room and sleep in the bedroom with her at night.

“They’re both wonderful. I would be extremely lonely without them,” she says. “They’re fun to be around.”

Chesapeake Bay Retrievers have been constant companions for Nebraska resident Emelise Baughman, 71, and her husband, Pat, since the second year of their 50-year marriage. They chose the breed since she can show the dogs in conformation competitions and he can compete with them in hunt tests.



Emelise Baughman and Paula

But Baughman, a mental health therapist, spent over a decade away from the show ring since her champion show dog, Hazel, had to stop showing at age 2 after she got pyometra and had to be spayed, disqualifying her from competition.

All that changed earlier this year



Brad and Lisa Waggoner with Keaton

when Baughman learned of a female puppy whose great-aunt is Hazel, and whose grandfather is their other dog, Diesel, a Champion Master Hunter.

“I had to have her,” Baughman says. “We named her Paula after Pat’s grandfather Paul, who once told him that if he ever got a Chesapeake, he’d never have another breed.”

Paula got Baughman back in the show ring—and into shape.

“I had to get back onto the elliptical,” she says. “Because when you gait an 80-pound athletic, super-conditioned dog around the ring, you have to be able to do it physically.”

By the time Paula was 6 months old, she’d won her group in two puppy competitions and given Baughman a precious memory: showing Paula at the Grand Island Kennel Club Dog Show, where her daughter and two granddaughters also showed Chessies.

“All four of us—three generations—were in the ring at the same time,” she says. “To me, that was just the best.”

Pennsylvania resident Steve Piatt, 70, is loyal to Labrador Retrievers since they’ve been beloved fishing and hunting companions for over four decades. His wife of 38 years, Paula, shares his passion for the breed and outdoor adventures.



Steve Piatt and Molly



Fred Souza and Bug

Top left: Photo by Bryn Souza; Top right: Courtesy of Steve Piatt; Bottom: Courtesy of Jill Schilp

"We do have a special marriage and not just because of the Labs, but we've always loved the breed," he says.

Years ago, when Piatt had terrible back pain that required surgery, Ben, a black Lab, stayed in bed with him watching the news and *Northern Exposure* reruns. Later, Maddie, a yellow Lab,

stayed in bed with him as he recovered from cancer treatments.

Now Riley, a yellow Lab, and Molly, a black Lab, are carrying the torch for predecessors Magic, Brooks, Ben, Maddie, Hailey, and Finn as constant companions who make life more fun.

"There's been eight (Labs) and I hope there's nine and ten, Lord willing," he says. "We can't envision a house without a Lab."

Dog Time, Any Way Possible

Other seniors prefer to find ways to spend time with dogs without having a pet of their own, such as raising service dogs (see sidebar) or dogsitting for loved ones. Connecticut resident Fred Souza, 77, and his wife, Nancy, frequently watch their daughter's Boston Terrier, Bug—and have grown quite close with the little dog, who enjoys snoozing in "sun puddles" in between snacking.

"I've had cancer over the years and I get really tired. So frequently I will take a nap in the afternoon," Souza says. "He comes in and snuggles up



Molly and Riley outdoors

next to me and it's fine."

Texas resident Jill Schilp, 78, a retired healthcare professional and author of *Dogs in Health Care*, enjoys cuddling with Kringle, the Golden Retriever she shares with her husband, George, on days when lupus makes it more challenging to move around. They adopted Kringle at Christmastime in 2023, which helped them through the grief of losing their previous Golden, Junior.

"Sometimes the right dog finds you," she says. "His size and his energy—and he's strong—created some unexpected challenges for us being older. But it turned out to be an advantage for me because he's very tall and I have a little bit of balance problems. So, I just put my hand on that boy, and I have something to lean on because he's so tall."

Kringle adds structure to their days, which includes watching squirrels in the garden and the Texas Rangers play baseball on TV. Walking the young dog helped Schilp build strength; she can walk twice as far now. Best of all, Kringle is a source of "great humor" in the home with his funny antics, like fetching his toys by name, or flopping onto his back to make silly noises.

"It just makes all the difference in the world to have a dog at this stage of life, I think, if you're a dog person," Schilp says.



Jill Schilp and Kringle



Mojo

Merrie Meyers, Ph.D., a 68-year-old who splits time between Florida and North Carolina, just got her first puppy last year. She's working with a dog trainer to teach Mojo, a Standard Poodle, to be her guide dog since she lost an eye to cancer.

"I have no depth and no spatial perception," she says. "The real experience was walking into a post at Costco because I just didn't see it."

While she teaches Mojo impulse control and basic obedience, he's reminding her to appreciate hummingbirds and smell flowers. Danny, her 16-year-old Bichon Frisé, is grudgingly learning to share her with the pup.

Ultimately, she's grateful to share her life with dogs since they helped her cope with the sudden death of her husband 21 years ago.

"I could have crawled into a hole and



Mojo (left) with Merrie Meyers and Danny

never come out, but the dogs needed to be walked every day and fed every day and they had their routines, and that really forced me to stay in the moment and stay in the living, so to speak. So, I think that's really important, what they do for us: They push us to be present," she says. "I don't think you're ever too old to get a dog." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

Puppy Raising: A Rewarding Alternative to Dog Ownership

When New York resident Jerry Burns, 74, retired last year, he wanted a volunteer role that would help him maintain a structured schedule.

He found the perfect fit as a puppy raiser for the nonprofit Guiding Eyes for the Blind. His job is to help socialize a German Shepherd Dog named Geneva to a variety of people, places, and situations. He enjoys the camaraderie with other puppy raisers, who often meet for training sessions and group outings with the future guide dogs.

"It absolutely makes you feel good," he says. "I love the fact that I can be a step for her future to try to get her prepared to do great things."



Jerry Burns, with Geneva (left), Kohl (on the table), and Buddy (at his feet)

LINKS FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Human Animal Bond Research
Institute: habri.org

Guiding Eyes for the Blind:
guidingeyes.org