

By Jen Reeder

Hearing *with* Heart

Life-changing Hearing Service Dogs Marguerite and Pam.

Twenty years ago, when Michelle Ludwig, MD, MPH, PhD, was in her medical residency, her husband Jonathan was traveling and had a serendipitous airport encounter with a Lab.

The dog was wearing a Canine Companions vest with a “Hearing Service Dog” patch. Since his wife was deaf, he asked the handler about what a hearing dog does. He was so impressed that back at home, he secretly submitted an application on his wife’s behalf for a hearing dog with the nonprofit.

It turned out to be a particularly poignant act of love. Soon after, he died unexpectedly – and a few months after he passed away, Canine Companions contacted Dr. Ludwig to let her know she’d been selected for “Team Training” with a hearing service dog.

“He had written in the application that he wanted me to have someone to help when he wasn’t there,” she recalls. “It was like hearing his voice again after he was gone.”

So she traveled from Houston, Texas, to Santa Rosa, California, where she partnered with Marguerite, a Lab-golden retriever cross who immediately changed her life.

“She told me when my pager went off, when someone knocked at the door, when my phone rang,” Dr. Ludwig says. “Prior to being matched with her, I didn’t sleep when I was on call because I was afraid that I would miss a page.”

Now Dr. Ludwig is a professor of radiation oncology at the University of Colorado Anschutz in Denver, Colorado, who partnered with her second Canine Companions service dog in 2021. Pam, a seven-year-old yellow Lab, has also made a positive impact on her handler’s life. “She is so eager to work and loves alerting me to sounds,” she says. “She also loves visiting the occasional patient who is having a bad day and needs a ‘Lab visit.’”

At home, Pam is a beloved family member, which includes Dr. Ludwig’s current husband, John, and their two young daughters, Sylvie, 5, and Charlotte, 6.

“They read books to her every night, and she is just so patient with them,” she says.

Dr. Ludwig and Pam share a close relationship because Pam is empathetic and in tune with her handler’s emotions. “Pam is very active, enthusiastic, aware of her surroundings, and has a very keen intellect about sounds that she hasn’t been officially trained to alert but thinks I need to know about, which is amazing,” she says. “Her

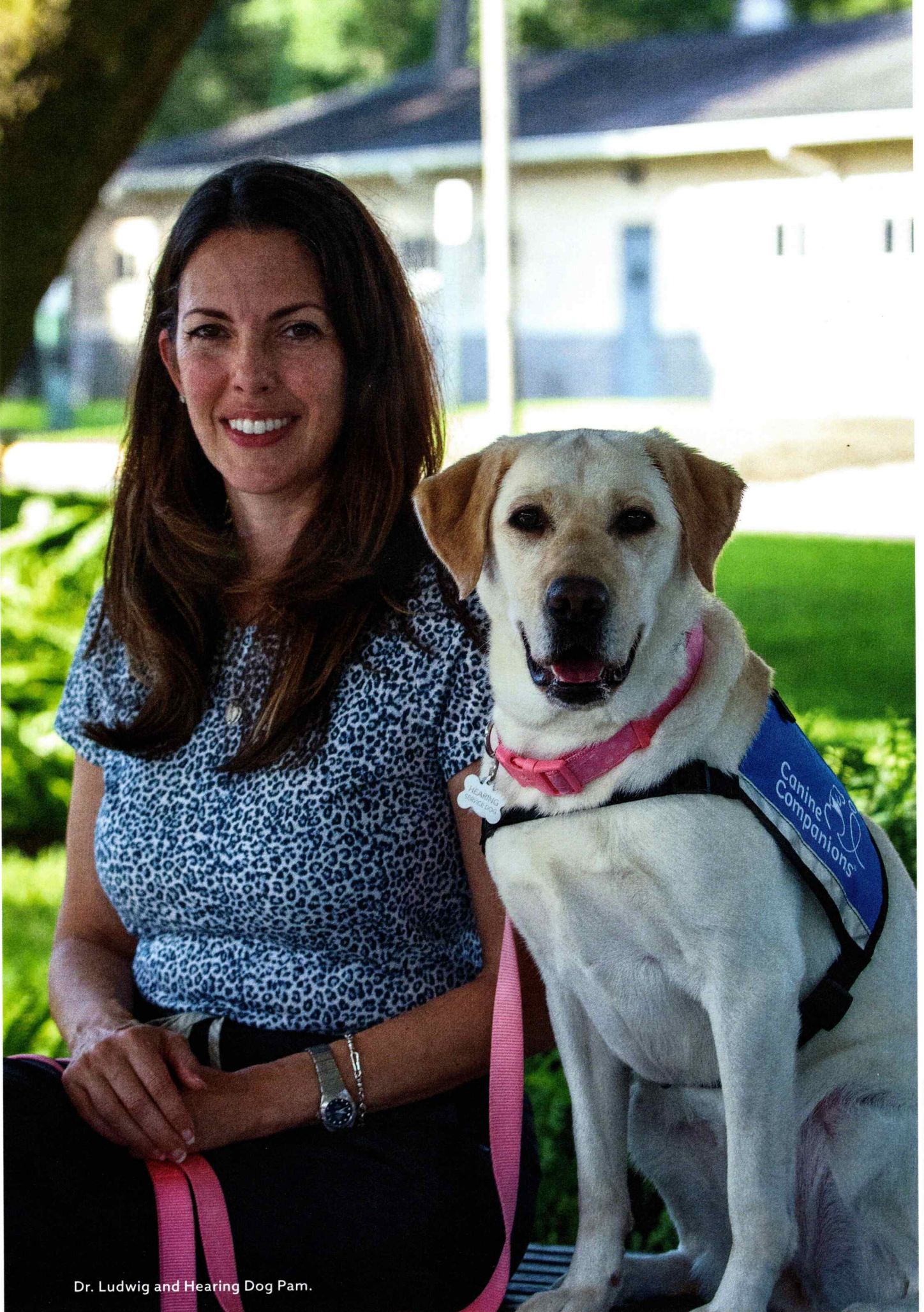


PHOTO COURTESY CANINE COMPANIONS

Dr. Ludwig and Hearing Dog Pam.



PHOTO COURTESY DR. MICHELLE LUDWIG

puppy raisers told me that even before going to hearing dog training and formally learning to alert, she would tell them about cars coming around the corner when they were out walking. She has alerted me to bikers coming behind me when we walk, cars that have been driving a little too fast if we're walking in the neighborhood, my girls crying at night, sirens, and other noises."

Pam's passion for her work is clear. In fact, she loves to work so much that on days that Dr. Ludwig works in the operating room, which dogs can't enter, Pam seems disappointed not to jump in the car and head to work with her best friend.

So the intrepid Lab will find other ways to be helpful – sometimes in comical fashion. For instance, her absolute favorite noise to alert to is when water boils. With most sounds, Pam doesn't alert anyone except Dr. Ludwig, but boiling water is a different story.

Once when she and Pam were on vacation in a shared house with several other people they hadn't yet met, Dr. Ludwig came downstairs to find a very confused man standing by the stove with his pasta water boiling.

He asked, "Um, why is your dog jumping and poking me with her nose?"

To which Dr. Ludwig replied, "Because your water is boiling."

"I went on with my conversation with my other friend, and we both just laughed at the very confused look on his face," she recalls. "He didn't know that I was deaf or that she was a hearing service dog or that hearing service dogs even existed. Once I finally stopped laughing and explained, he thought it was hilarious and was very impressed with Pam."

Pam is one of more than 800 hearing service dogs bred, raised, trained, and placed – for free – with people with hearing

loss, according to Mari Johnson, hearing dog instructor and senior instructor at Canine Companions. (The nonprofit has placed more than 8,400 service dogs for people with disabilities, such as veterans with PTSD, people who use wheelchairs, and children and adults with diabetes.)

Through positive training, hearing service dogs learn to alert to a timer, doorbell, alarm clock, keys dropping, and a door knock. Johnson notes that through a partnership with Eukanuba, the dogs eat “science-driven nutrition” to help the dogs perform at their best – and to be rewarded for learning skills.

Once the hearing dog is placed with a client, they learn skills during a two-week training class to go home and teach the dog to alert to additional sounds.

“I always like to say that our hearing dogs are like Legos because they are highly customizable and you can teach them pretty much any sound that has a succinct occurrence that has meaning in your life: incoming work notification, phone ringing, tea kettle, smoke alarm, sirens – fire, police, ambulance, tornado – baby crying, name being called, etcetera,” she says. “I once even had a client teach his dog to alert him to the sound of a rattlesnake.”

Canine Companions breeds Labs, golden retrievers, and crosses of the two as service dogs. Labs can become successful hearing dogs because the nonprofit uses food rewards during training, according to Johnson.

“Because Labradors are highly food motivated as well as intelligent, as soon as they learn the basic concept of alerting a person to a sound and how to take them to the source of the sound, they excel and love the work,” she says. “It never ceases to amaze me to see that these dogs’ tails are always wagging when it comes time to work.”

That’s certainly the case with Pam, who thrives as a hearing dog for Dr. Ludwig. Because of her overwhelmingly positive experiences with both Pam and Marguerite, Dr. Ludwig hopes other people with hearing loss will consider partnering with a service dog from Canine Companions.

“My service dogs have completely changed my life. From helping me feel safe at home to giving me confidence at work, they make everyday tasks so much easier,” she says. “I am so fortunate that my late husband happened to meet a Canine Companions hearing service dog in the airport!” 🐾

For more information about Canine Companions, visit: canine.org.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America and a member of the DWAA Hall of Fame. 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.



Dr. Ludwig’s children love Pam.

PHOTOS COURTESY DR. MICHELLE LUDWIG

