



★ SUPER SLOAN ★

A skilled companion dog uplifts a young girl with vision loss.

By Jen Reeder

Courtesy Dogs Inc.

Sometimes when 10-year-old Emma Brown walks her Labrador Retriever, Sloan, passersby will comment on what a beautiful dog she has—to which Emma likes to reply, “He’s my special dog.”

He certainly is. Sloan was bred, raised, and trained by the nonprofit Dogs Inc for the skilled companion dog program for children with vision loss. Emma partnered with her new dog in February 2025 after experiencing sudden vision loss in her right eye when she was 8 years old due to a rare condition called permanent amblyopia vision loss. It affected her depth perception, which can cause her to trip or drop things. It led to kids picking on her at school, according to her mom, Alexis Brown.

She and her husband, Brandon Brown, grew concerned to see their outgoing daughter become quiet and withdrawn. The little girl even asked them, “Why did God choose me to have this?”

“We were like, ‘What are we going to do? How can we get our beautiful daughter back to the person that she was?’ Because Emma is very outspoken and very sweet, very gentle, very kind,” Alexis says. “And when she was going through this hardship, she was very shut down.”

Entering the Sloan Zone

Learning about the Dogs Inc program proved to be a “game changer.” A trainer from Dogs Inc flew with Sloan from Florida to the family’s home in Dayton, Ohio, to introduce Emma to her new dog—who walked straight to her.

“I was happy and excited,” Emma recalls.

Sloan turned out to be a beloved addition to the family, which includes Emma’s twin brother, Bentley; younger sister, Payton; and dogs Rosie and Taco. The black Lab loves swimming with Emma in a nearby lake, playing with his toys, reading books together—*Clifford*



the Big Red Dog books are a favorite—and generally spending time with his girl.

“He cuddles with me, and we say our prayers together,” Emma says. “He’s my best friend. He doesn’t judge me for my eye condition, and he loves me for me.”

Her mom has been delighted to see Sloan’s positive impact happen so quickly.

“Emma’s happy,” she says. “She’s herself again.”

Like all Dogs Inc skilled companion

dogs, Sloan is well-trained in basic obedience cues like *sit*, *stay*, *come* and *heel*—a must for working with children—and knows additional cues like *chin* to rest his chin on Emma’s hand or lap, *hug* to lay his front legs across her lap for a hug, and *close* to get under her legs to avoid someone tripping over him in public.

But Sloan’s top skill is simply being a trusted friend.

“If I have a bad day, he always cheers



me up,” Emma says. “He’s really silly. And when I struggle on my homework, I sit down and he helps me calm down.”

She tries to be a good friend, too.

“I brush him every single day,” she says. “That’s one of his favorite things.”

Skilled Companions

Sloan is one of 60 currently active skilled companion dogs from Dogs Inc, a nonprofit guide dog school based in Palmetto, Florida, according to Amanda Ronning, skilled companion program lead at Dogs Inc.

“It was initially launched with the idea of getting children accustomed to a large dog in the home and getting used to caring for a large dog with the hope of preparing them for a guide dog in the future,” she says. “And the dogs provide unwavering emotional support.”

Kids learn initial skills for caring for a big dog, such as walking, bathing, feeding, and grooming, as well as playing. Skilled companion dogs are available—free of charge—to children ages 5 to 17 with vision loss.

Skilled companion dogs are not service dogs, so they don’t have the special access to public places that guide dogs do. However, they are trained to have

impeccable house manners and almost perfect leash manners, Ronning notes.

“The biggest thing we’re looking for in skilled companion dogs for children is being easy on leash—they have to be easy enough on leash for that child to be able to handle them safely,” she says. “Because again, we want the kids to be building the skills eventually to hopefully be ready for a guide dog at some point in the future.”

But even if children don’t go on to

partner with a guide dog, the benefits that skilled companion dogs can bring to their young lives are invaluable after they experience vision loss, as Sloan has shown with Emma.

“It’s a big life change for them, going from having full vision to not—the changes in depth perception and just the change in perception of your peers can be challenging,” Ronning says. “It’s not uncommon for us to hear from them that they had a complete change



Puppy Raisers for Skilled Companion Dogs

Like many guide dog organizations, Dogs Inc relies on volunteers around the country to raise puppies in their homes for the first 12 to 16 months of their life. Puppy raisers train dogs in basic obedience and socialize them to a variety of people, places, sounds, and situations.

"We're always looking for puppy raisers," says Amanda Ronning, skilled companion program lead at Dogs Inc. "We wouldn't have these dogs for these programs if we didn't have puppy raisers. They provide the foundation for these dogs to be the great dogs that they are."

Plus, there's a terrific perk: "You'll always be getting a new dog every year."

in personality, and it just kind of brings out the sunshine in their lives again to have the dog there. You're never going to question your dog's loyalty. They're always going to be there to support you."

The program proved so popular with children and teens that Dogs Inc expanded to offer skilled companion dogs to adults with vision loss who don't yet need a guide dog, as well as military veterans, military families, and Gold Star families who lost a family member who served in the military.

Dogs Inc works entirely with Labrador

Retrievers and crosses of Labs and Golden Retrievers for all guide dog and skilled companion programs, according to Ronning.

"They're just extremely trainable dogs," she says. "They also tend to just be very stable, temperament-wise. The big goofy Labs, they've got very good food drive, so they're willing to do whatever you ask them for food. The Labrador, just overall, they're lovely dogs. You really need a dog that has strong independent thinking skills."

To help families integrate a new

skilled companion dog into their home, Dogs Inc provides an "online university" about the dogs before sending a staff member to the home with the dog to go over all training cues, discuss crate training, and generally make sure the family feels comfortable with the new dog.

Dogs Inc then provides ongoing support whenever questions arise and provides five years of dog food as a free service, Ronning notes.

Positive Change

She's thrilled that Sloan has made such a positive impact on Emma's life.

"Sloan makes Emma so much happier and brings so much joy to her life," she said. "Who can ask for more than that?"

In fact, Sloan has brought joy not just to Emma but the entire family, according to Alexis.

"He's definitely been a big addition to our family," she says. "He's our big, gentle giant. Emma's twin does have autism, and Payton has some developmental disabilities of her own. Sloan is our big teddy bear that the kids can just love on, play with and enjoy. And he kind of clears up the bad days and makes them into good. We couldn't imagine our life without him now."

Ultimately, she is grateful that Sloan has been such a fantastic addition to her family and hopes other children with vision loss will consider partnering with a skilled companion dog from Dogs Inc.

"Without Sloan, I don't know where Emma would be," she says. "He has definitely been that light in her life that she needs." **FD**

Journalist Jen Reeder is the 2025 Hall of Fame inductee of the Dog Writers Association of America.

For more information about the Dogs Inc Skilled Companion Dog Program, visit dogsinc.org.



The Brown family