

in their
Debt

By Jen Reeder



HERSHEY'S

A chocolate Lab is making a sweet impact on an Army veteran's life.

Kiss

Arrmy veteran Avianna Velasquez is frequently amused by Hershey, her three-year-old chocolate Lab. The comical canine might walk past a chair and decide he actually needs to sit in it. He likes to rub his face on her leg when they're walking close together just to say hi, and he often sleeps with either a blanket or a toy, in his mouth, that they made at Build-a-Bear.

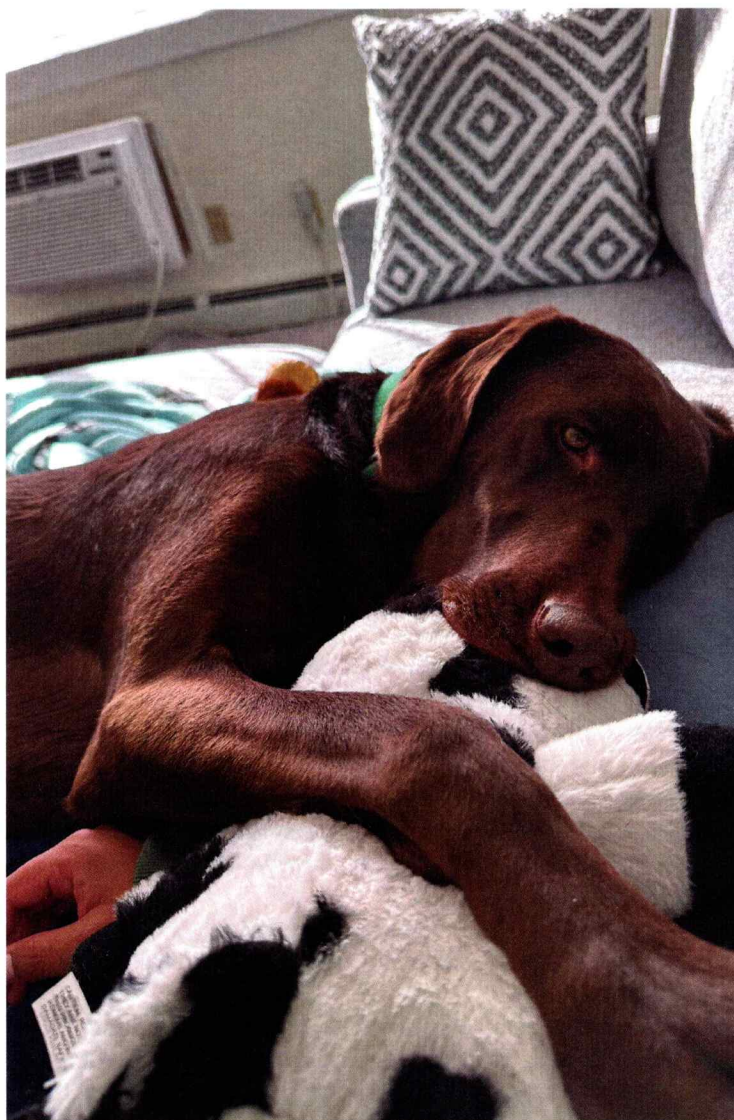
Then there's his signature move.

"He likes to sit like an old man, so he'll sit in my arms and just lean back like he's a person," she says. "And then he'll fall asleep and snore in my ear."

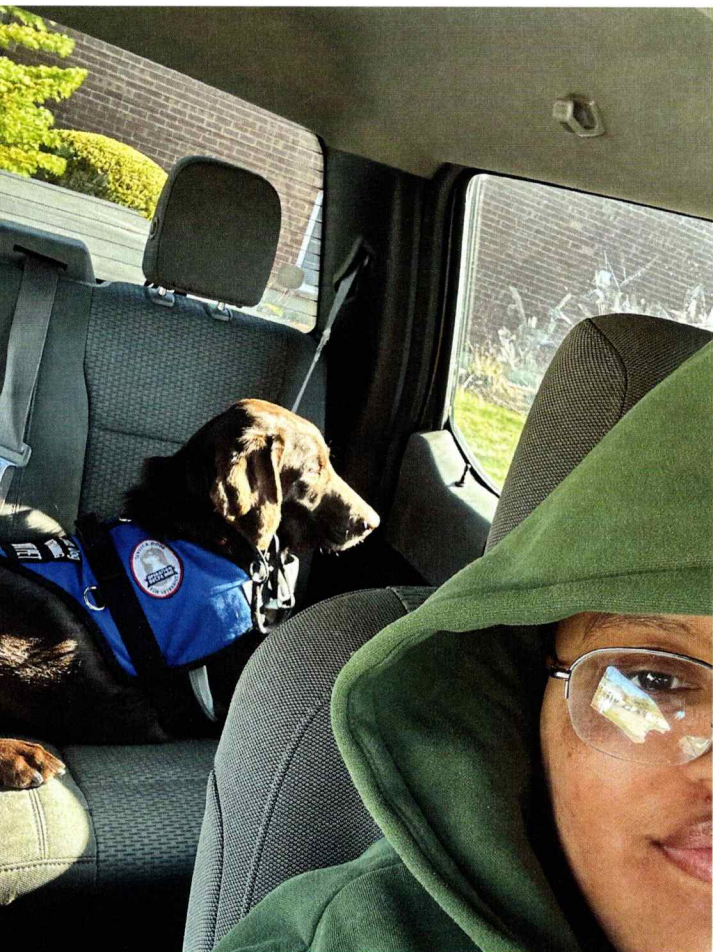
Hershey matched as her service dog in March of 2025 through Operation Delta Dog, a New Hampshire nonprofit that rescues dogs from shelters to become service dogs for military veterans. The service dogs and related programs are 100 percent free to veterans.

The program is unusual because after matching with a dog, veterans take them home but spend the next year attending weekly training classes with their dogs and other veterans at the nonprofit's facility in Hollis, New Hampshire. This model helps get service dogs to veterans faster, and strengthens a team's bond while customizing training to a veteran's specific needs and lifestyle.

Due to her PTSD, Velasquez has been training Hershey in behavior interruption. For instance, once when she was having an anxiety attack and began hitting her forehead, Hershey interrupted her by inserting his face between



Hershey is a constant companion.



Velasquez goes outside more thanks to Hershey.

her hand and her head so that she'd stop, which worked like a charm.

He's also learning to offer pressure therapy after a nightmare; and to pick up keys, wallets, or a dropped leash. He intuitively knows when she's becoming anxious – sometimes before she herself does – and will rest his head in her lap.

But possibly his greatest contribution is simply having funny quirks and an upbeat personality. "He makes me laugh, and I think that's the best part about it," Velasquez says. "He brings humor to my life where I think I had such darkness."

She feels the lighthearted Lab has made an incredibly positive impact on her life in less than a year since matching.

"I used to be a very shut-in person, closed off, and he has been able to allow me to get out to go to the grocery store," she says. "I couldn't imagine a year ago having the friends that I do now or even going on a date. I'm going

on a date on Friday, and I wouldn't have been able to do that a couple of months ago without him."

With Hershey by her side, she even attended an NFL game to cheer for the New England Patriots earlier this year. "It was super crowded, super hectic, and he navigated the crowd phenomenally for me," she says. "He was on point throughout the entire experience."

Life with Velasquez is also a score for Hershey, who landed in an animal shelter when his previous owners were about to have a baby – a choice that puzzles Velasquez.

"They didn't want to have a baby and have him. I guess they thought he was going to be too aggressive," she says. "I have him around my niece and my nephew. My nephew just turned two, and he's great with the kids. So I don't know why they ever thought to give him up."

About 85 percent of the dogs rescued and trained by Operation Delta Dog are Labs and Lab mixes, according to Executive Director Charlotte Troddyn.

"We say that we rescue one life and save two," she says, "because our mission is to rescue dogs to become service dogs for veterans with PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and/or military sexual trauma to reduce isolation and suicide among our veterans."

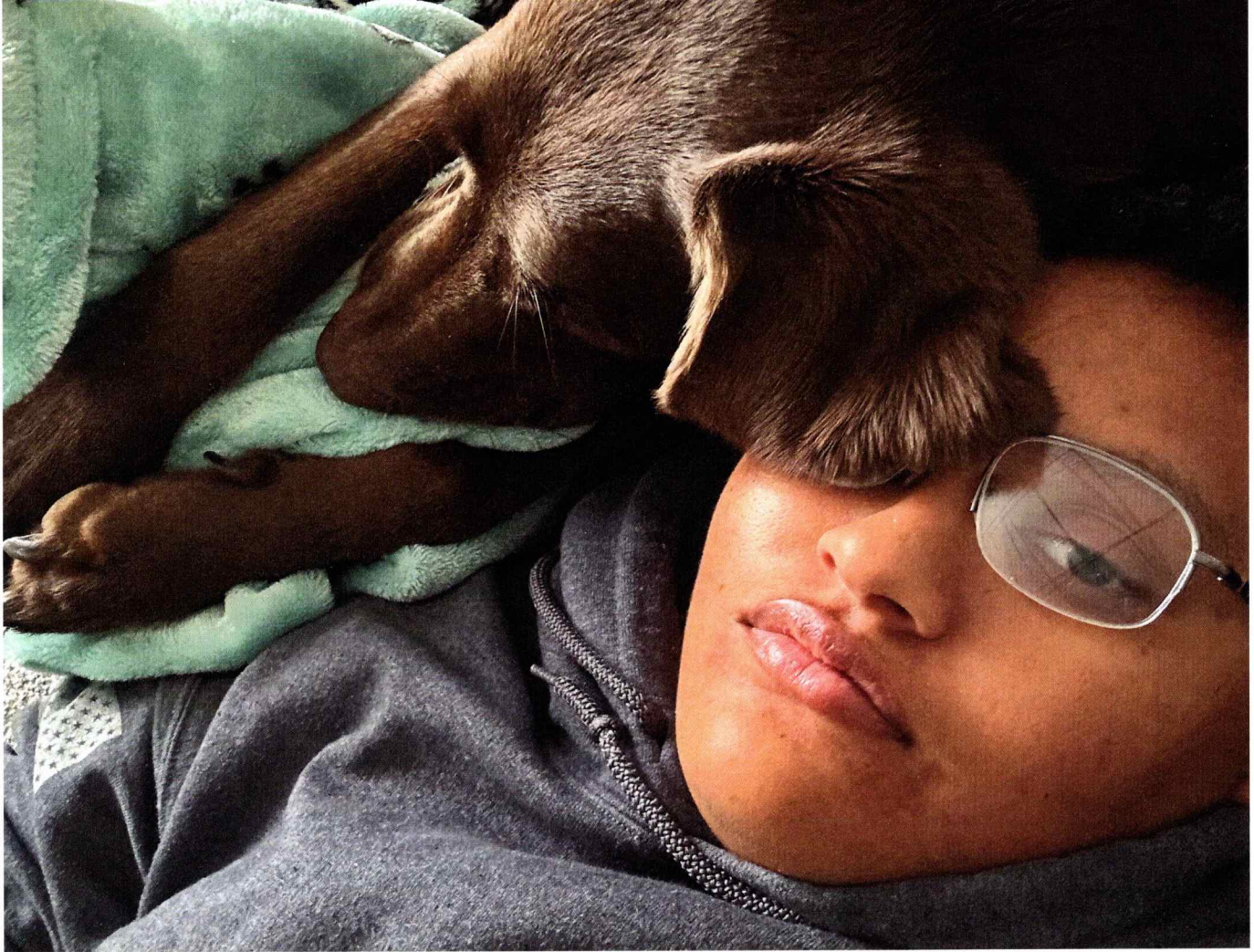
Operation Delta Dog launched in 2013 in the kitchen of Tricia Blanchet, who founded the nonprofit after reading an article about the high rate of suicide among veterans soon after learning hundreds of thousands of dogs were being euthanized in U.S. animal shelters each year.

"So as any busy mother of two that has no time, she was like, 'I need to fix both of these problems at once,'" Troddyn quips.

To partner with a service dog through Operation Delta Dog, veterans must live within an hour and a half from Hollis, New Hampshire, which is about 40 minutes north of Boston, Massachusetts. That way, they can attend one or two training classes with their dog each week – whether practicing skills at the nonprofit's facility or heading to public spaces like coffee shops, grocery stores, and movie theaters.

The training only involves positive methods; handlers reward dogs with kibble and treats straight from their hands. Dogs at Operation Delta Dog never eat a meal from a bowl – only their handler's hands – so food-motivated Labs often excel in the program, according to Troddyn.

"Our dogs really need to be food-motivated people pleasers – liking to be around people, enjoying that," she notes. "They need to be not too scared to go out in public



and hear loud noises and go up and down elevators. So Labs really fit the bill."

During foundational training at Operation Delta Dog, the Labs learn to retrieve items like wallets, keys, and TV remote controls since many veterans in the program have PTSD as well as physical impairments in their backs and hips. The dogs also learn to push the button to open ADA-compliant doors, offer pressure therapy to break up night terrors, and create space in crowds and grocery stores, according to Troddyn.

Advanced training customizes skills to the needs and lifestyle of each individual veteran, such as studying on a college campus or riding public transportation.

Troddyn hopes in the future there will be federal funding to provide service dogs to veterans because there is still so much need. With financing, Operation Delta Dog could double its kennel capacity and end its waitlist.

She feels there's an urgent need to help veterans by getting them service dogs. "I truly do believe that they've sacrificed enough for our country," she says. "So this is a small thing we can do to say thank you."

To Velasquez, the chance to partner with a service dog like Hershey doesn't seem small. "I really think having a

service dog is such a benefit to your life because so many doctors try to push medication on you, and a service dog is a natural remedy," she says.

She's also grateful for the social activities offered to veterans and their service dogs by Operation Delta Dog, which include arts and crafts, yoga, ice fishing, and a movie club.

"It's kind of like networking and the dogs are all great friends," she says. "So Operation Delta Dog is doing something amazing. They're really building a community, and it's helping a lot of veterans." 🐾

For more information about Operation Delta Dog, visit: OperationDeltaDog.org. All photos courtesy of Avianna Velasquez.



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.