

Dynamic Duo

Yellow Lab Guster spreads smiles as a facility dog at a Colorado middle school alongside Deputy Brian Corbin.

Last Halloween, Brian Corbin dressed in the uniform he always wears as a deputy in the Douglas County Sheriff's Office in Colorado. Then he pulled on a Batman mask and helped his partner, a yellow Lab named Guster, don a costume of Batman's sidekick, Robin.

Then they headed to work at Cresthill Middle School in Highlands Ranch, where the response from seventh and eighth grade students was electric – high vibes, fist bumps, exclamations, and even photo requests.

"Halloween was a hit, and now I've set the bar so high," Deputy Corbin said with a laugh. "What am I going to do for next Halloween? I've got to think of something."

It was a fun experience for a team with a serious mission: keeping kids

safe. Deputy Corbin is a school resource officer (SRO) tasked with protecting students in the event of a crisis like an active attacker situation. He also offers education about why it's important to follow laws.

"I try to be a resource for students, families, and the administration, and be an informal mentor/counselor for the students," he said. "Just to be another adult in the building and try to be a kid's trusted adult, even though it's different because I'm dressed in my full cop uniform. It can be intimidating."

Deputy Corbin has found he seems a lot less intimidating since partnering with Guster in May of 2025. In fact, the two-year-old Lab acts as a sort of icebreaker with students – particularly new students who might feel anxious.

"Especially the seventh graders at the beginning of the year, they're scared. It's a new building. They're small fish in the school, so they have a hard time talking to me because I'm a cop. But with Guster, I'm like, 'Hey, you can pet Guster. His job is to get pets and make you feel comfortable,'" he said. "So as they're petting Guster, I'll start, 'How was your weekend?"



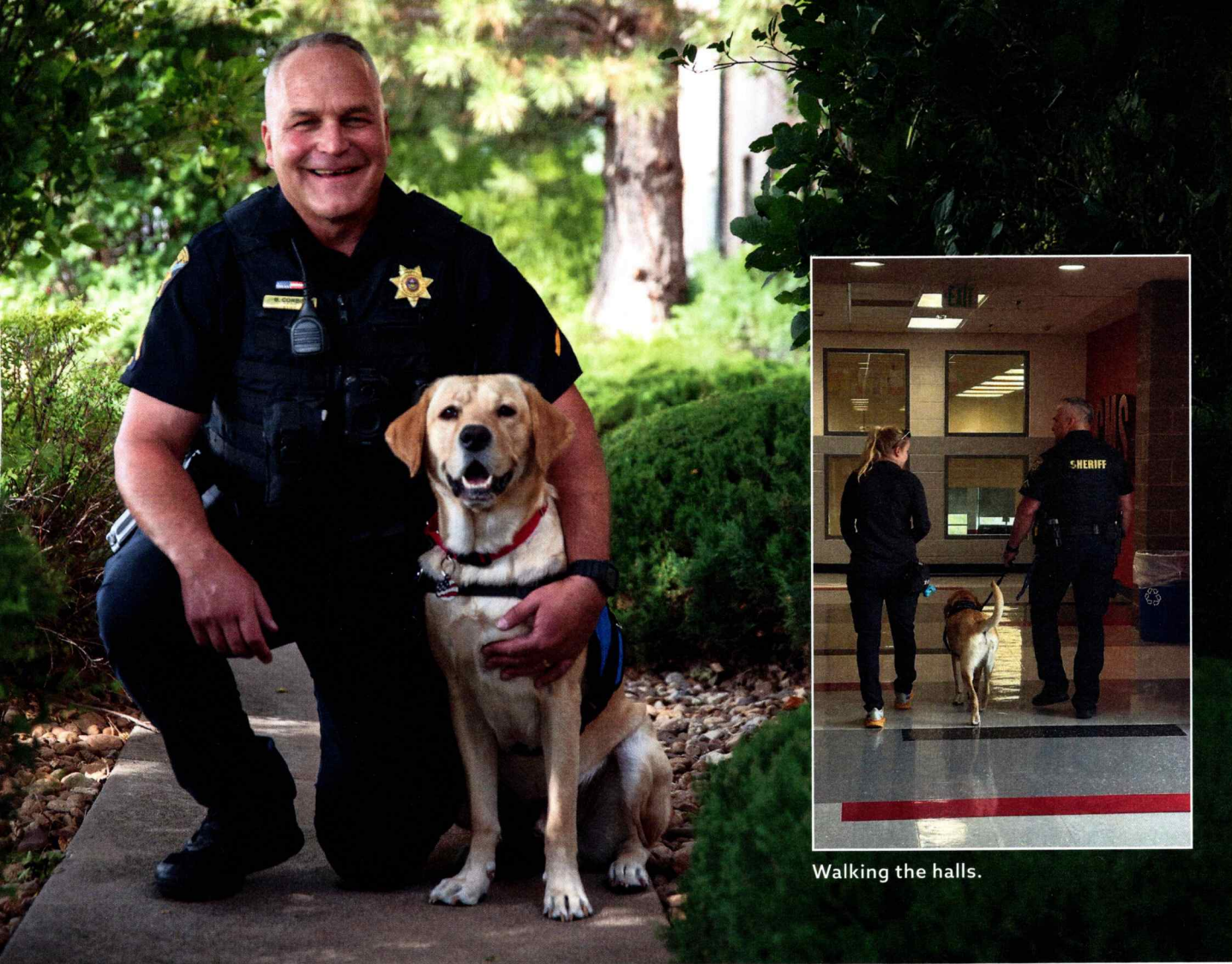
The Dynamic Duo: Deputy Brian Corbin and Guster.

Do you play video games? Do you play any sports or do you do drama or band? Then before they know it, they're actually talking to me. He's my gateway to getting them to open up sooner."

Thanks to Guster's canine superpowers, the students typically relax and smile.

Guster trained as a facility dog at Freedom Service Dogs, a Denver-based nonprofit that trains service dogs and facility dogs for veterans, first responders, and others at no cost. Guster was the first facility dog trained by the organization.

The Lab's main task is to provide deep pressure therapy to students, which can involve placing his head in a lap or laying his body across a student's legs. Deep pressure has



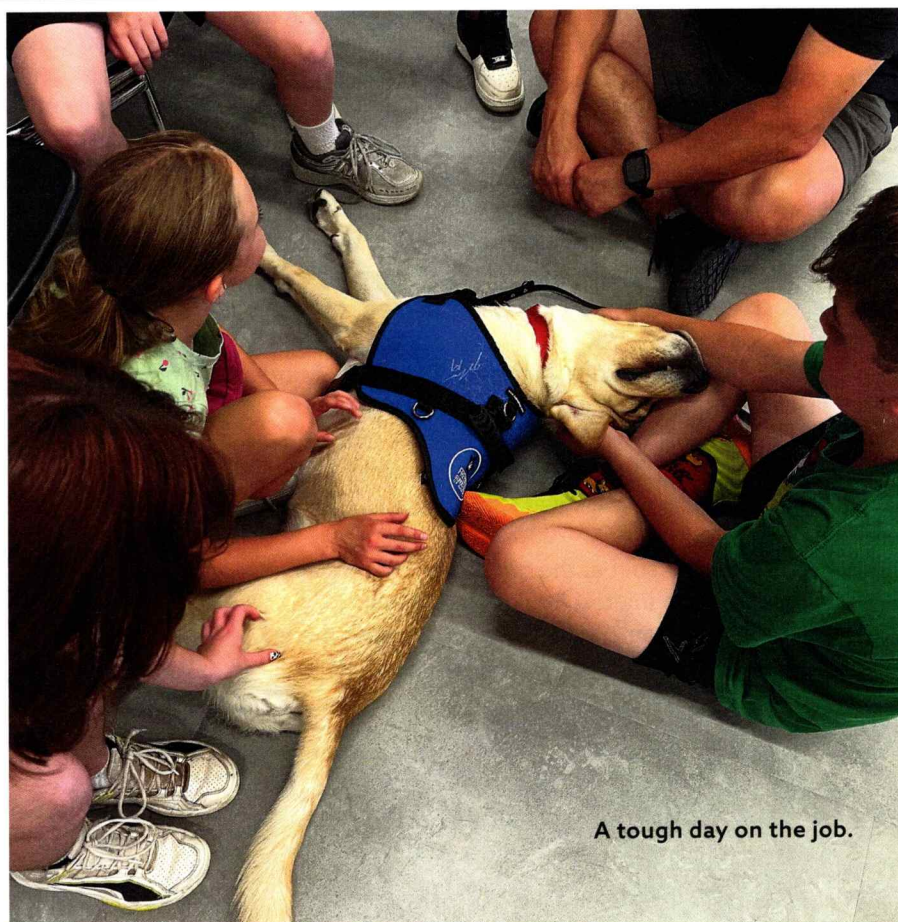
Walking the halls.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FREEDOM SERVICE DOGS

proven calming by researchers like Temple Grandin, who created a “hug machine” for people with autism.

The school counselor will often ask if Guster is free to join a student in a counseling session. In fact, during a phone interview for this article, Deputy Corbin’s walkie talkie called out with such a request (which led to us ending the interview so Guster could go work his magic).

“I do use him for kids that are in mental health crisis, where they’re in the counseling office and they could be suicidal, they could be just having whatever issue,” Deputy Corbin said. “I’ll bring Guster in and ask, ‘Do you want to pet Guster?’ Some kids are so upset they’re not ready for that at that moment. But most of the kids are like, ‘Yep, I want to pet Guster.’”



A tough day on the job.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FREEDOM SERVICE DOGS

And while they're talking, it just gets them through that moment with a little bit more ease."

Deputy Corbin, who is in his 50s, is concerned with the negative impact technology and social media seem to be having on young people. Suicides have doubled among children aged 10-14 in the past decade, making it the second leading cause of death for the age group in the U.S., according to The Jason Foundation.

"It's so much different, and it's harder to be a middle schooler or high schooler than when I was, because we didn't have cell phones. You went out and played," he said. "There wasn't the constant bullying of Snapchat or text messages. It's just 24/7."

He's happy that since partnering with Guster, everyone at school seems nicer to one another. Guster greets students each morning as they head to class, enjoying lots of attention and pets.

Then after a day's work, the laid-back Lab heads home. Once his working dog vest comes off, he can goof off with Deputy Corbin's wife, two teenage sons, and their pets. The family's pug, Rosco, loves trying to play tug with Guster while Roo, a rescued Chihuahua mix, looks on unapprovingly.

Guster also likes to sniff at the birdcage of the parakeet, Kiwi, who returns his interest by chirping at him.

"When he comes home, he's a regular dog and the boys roughhouse with him and he gets the zoomies," he said. "It's been great."

Because Guster and Deputy Corbin have proven to be such a "fantastic" team, Freedom Service Dogs has trained more facility dogs for schools and hopes to continue to expand the program, according to Kendle Frank, content coordinator for Freedom Service Dogs and *Just Labs* contributor.

"Brian and Guster have been trailblazers because they were our very first facility dog SRO team," she said. "So we're really excited about them and just growing our facility dog program in general."

She noted that facility dogs are very similar to therapy dogs. The difference is that therapy dogs are typically well-behaved pets of a volunteer, while facility dogs are purpose-bred by a service dog organization and trained to learn specific tasks, such as applying deep pressure therapy on cue. In one instance, Freedom Service Dogs trained a facility dog for special education classrooms to carry a tissue box or stuffed animal to crying kids.

Labs make excellent facility dogs because they're typically happy, easy to train, eager to work, and have an ideal size for tasks like deep pressure therapy, according to Frank.

"They're the perfect weight," she said. "They're not too big that they're going to crush you, but they're also big enough that the task is going to be effective because they can put just the right amount of weight on their body."

For his part, Deputy Corbin is delighted that the school district just approved two more facility dogs. He's seen the positive effect Guster has made on students, which will be particularly valuable at the school next year when it welcomes sixth graders for the first time.

He's also grateful that Guster offers comfort and stress relief to teachers, especially when they're grieving a death in the family or facing other challenges. He marvels that Guster seems to intuitively know to give extra attention and affection to children with autism or Down syndrome.

"The best thing about partnering with Guster is just all the smiles and comfort that he's brought to everybody that he's helped," he said. "To be an SRO, it's more of a give back than just being a regular cop. You can see the work and the progress. And for me, it's been a new facet and re-energized me as an SRO." 🐾

For more information about Freedom Service Dogs, visit: FreedomServiceDogs.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.