

In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

Calling All Labs

Labs spread love to children and adults through videograms

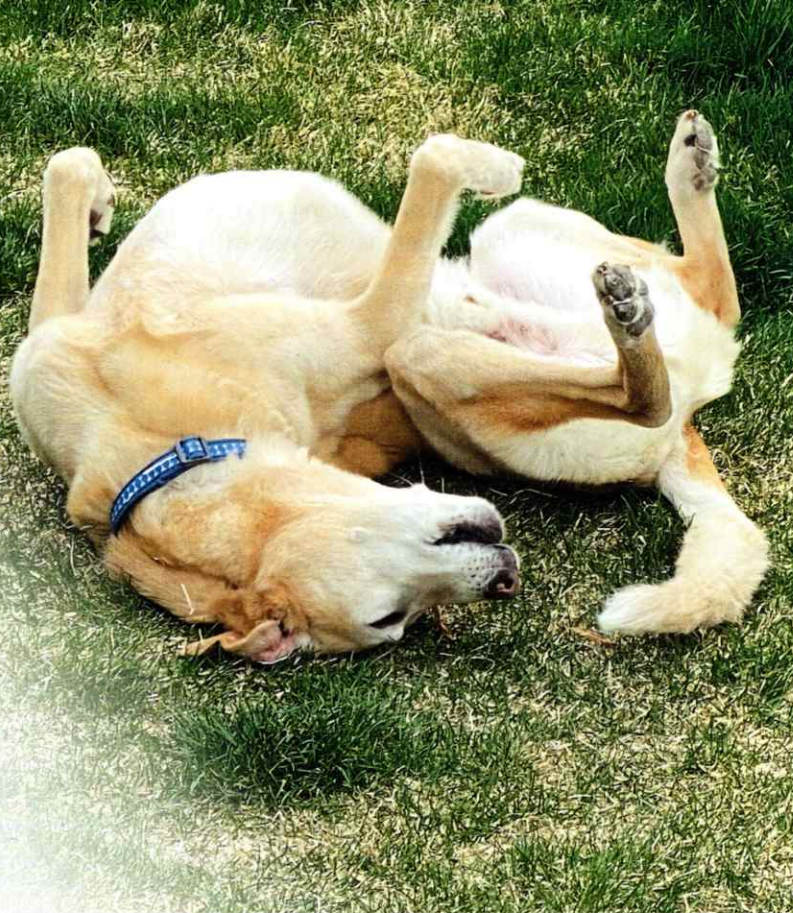
There are so many reasons why Labs have been the most popular breed in America for a record-breaking 29 years: their versatility, friendliness, athleticism, and trainability for starters.

Because Labs are so beloved, they have a special capacity to comfort their families and strangers in tough times. Now, Lab lovers across the country are stepping up to spread that Labrador magic through the American Kennel Club (AKC) PupPals program.

Meredith Saraceno, manager of AKC Public Education, said the program launched in August of 2019 as a way to share uplifting messages – from dogs – to children coping with illness, the death of a loved one, or challenges in school. Dog owners submitted photos of their pets and a few notes about their favorite snacks or tricks, and the organization would use the materials to create and mail a greeting card “from” the dog to the child.

Less than a year later, of course, the world turned upside down when the coronavirus pandemic took hold.

“With everything going on right now, the uncertainty of these times and the isolating feeling that a lot of people are feeling, we thought, ‘Well, what can we as an organization do to help?’” Saraceno shared. “So we said, ‘We already have this wonderful program that brings happiness and the love of dogs to others. Why not open it up?’”



PupPal Rio rolled around in his video.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JEN REEDER

The AKC expanded the PupPals program to include people diagnosed with COVID-19, doctors, nurses, and anyone struggling with isolation during social distancing. Dog owners create upbeat videos of their pets – less than one minute long – as though their pooch is speaking.

“They just talk about their favorite tricks or their favorite things to do, whether it be lying on the couch, or eating cheese, or whatnot,” she said. “It’s told from the perspective of the dog, and it’s just a sweet little way to bring a smile to people’s faces.”

Members of the public can nominate as many loved ones as they like to receive a free videogram from an AKC PupPal, and dog owners of any breed or mix can create and submit PupPal videos of one or all of their dogs. The only caveat: no people, just dogs.

Saraceno had fun filming a PupPal video of Remy, her six-year-old chocolate Lab. In Remy’s message, he “talks” about his three favorite things: being a couch potato, chasing squirrels in the yard, and eating cheese. Fittingly, she rewarded him afterward with a piece of cheese.

“You know Labs. They’re not picky on the snacks. He hears the refrigerator’s cheese drawer open and comes running,” she said with a laugh. “Any cheese will do.”

The AKC often fields requests for PupPal videos featuring Labs, so she hopes more Lab owners will share PupPal videos. At the time of this writing, the program had more than 260 dog videos and more than 580 requests for them.

“Labs are great for this program. Their goofy personalities shine through, and a lot of them can do tricks

and skills," she said. "We certainly welcome Lab owners to send us videos."

Washington State resident Misha Abbenhouse said it was so easy to submit PupPal videos that she created one for each of her four Labs, including Indy, her seven-year-old black Lab; and Strider, her six-year-old yellow.

"Strider is a very special and joyful dog," she said. "He just loves everyone, and he means a lot to us, so when we had an opportunity to share him with others through PupPals, we jumped at the opportunity."

In the lighthearted video, Strider shared his love of roughhousing with his sister Chilly, going mushroom hunting, and watching football on the couch. Because he loves treats, he got a big cookie after the video – one that helped keep the enthusiastic dog focused during filming.

Abbenhouse said she's witnessed firsthand the power of canine companionship. Her mother spent a lot of time in the hospital after a horrific motorcycle accident and later, a battle with cancer. When therapy dogs would visit, it brightened everyone's day.

So Abbenhouse trained her Lab, Indy, to pass the AKC's Canine Good Citizen test and become a therapy dog. When social distancing went into effect and physical visits were

PupPals spread cheer to people who could use a boost.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MISHA ABbenhOUSE



PupPal Indy



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEN REEDER


Just Labs

PupPal Strider

not an option, she signed him up as a PupPal for virtual visits. "These days, it is important to be creative about the ways in which we can reach out and positively affect someone's day," she said. "Small acts of kindness can make a big difference."

In Indy's PupPal video, he demonstrated his best party trick, which is "sit pretty." "It gets him a lot of snacks at parties and family gatherings," she noted. He also mentioned some of his favorite activities, like hanging out with his farm animal friends, hunting with the family, and sleeping at Abbenhouse's feet while she works.

She's grateful for the chance to help others in need thanks to her Labs. "I think that Labs are so naturally and beautifully in tune to people that they can offer very genuine comfort and

support to their family and others, which is one of the many reasons they are so beloved through the world," she said. "They also have such a soft and kind expression that it is hard not to smile when you look at them." 

To learn how to create an AKC PupPal video or nominate a loved one to receive one, visit: www.akc.org/public-education/akc-puppals-program/.



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



PHOTO COURTESY OF MISHA ABBENHOUSE

PupPal Remy

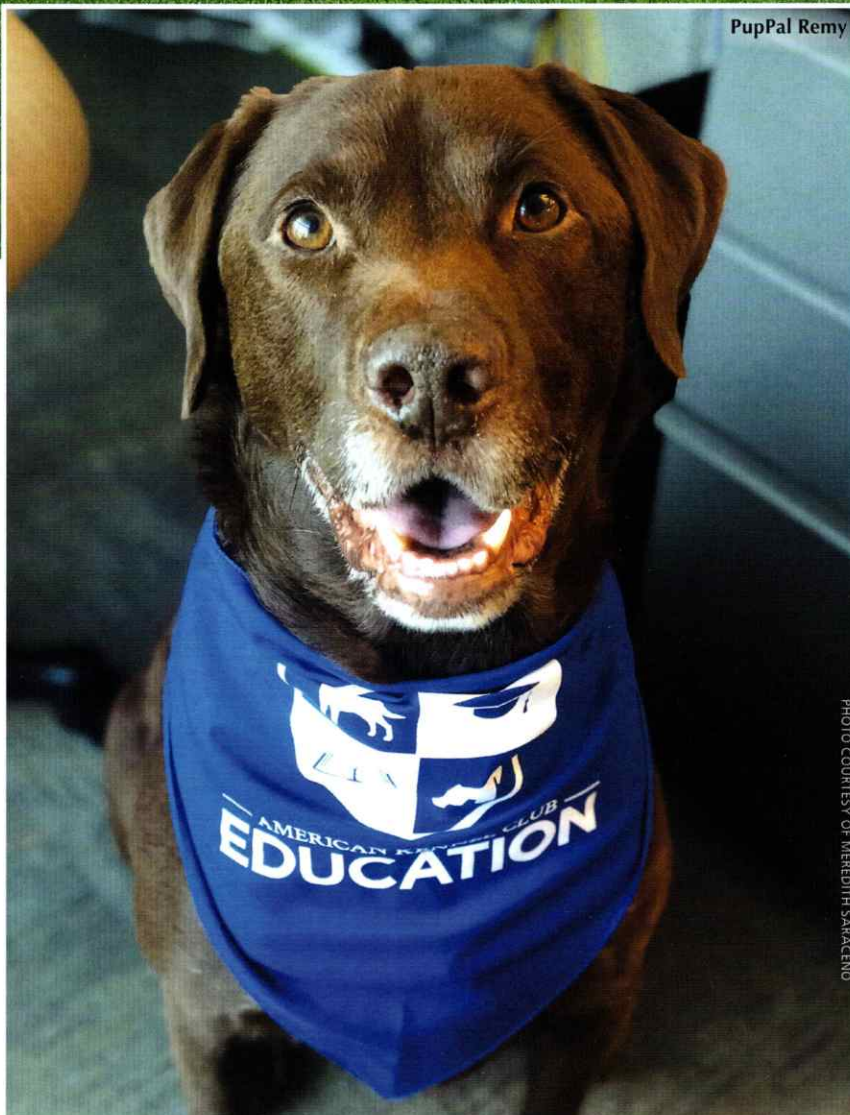


PHOTO COURTESY OF MEREDITH SARACENO