



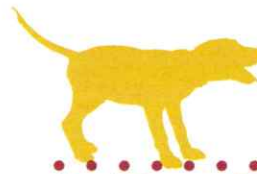
BUDDY

CANINE AIRPORT THERAPY SQUAD
PAWFESIONAL SERVICE SINCE 2018
DENVER INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Photos courtesy of Denver International Airport

Colorado resident Charlotte Levi is glad she can wear jeans when volunteering at Denver International Airport (DIA) with her therapy dog, a black Lab named Louie. The reason? She's always down on the floor with people who want to pet her dog – from children helping Louie search for dropped snacks under chairs to stressed passengers.

"One day this gal, probably in her early twenties, was on the floor with him for the longest time," Levi recalled. "And they called her flight, and she said, 'I feel like now I can finally get on the airplane.'"



In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

Denver Dogs

Labs spread love as part of the Canine Airport Therapy Squad

CATS

BUDDY

Breed: Labrador Retriever

Date of Birth: 10/26/2008

Weight: 74 lbs.

Hometown: Golden, CO

Favorite Treat: Bananas

Favorite Activity: Playing Fetch

Pet Peeve: Tennis Balls Under the Couch

Favorite Place: Telluride, CO



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DEUCE

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CATS

DEUCE

Breed: Labrador Retriever

Date of Birth: 5/3/2010

Weight: 85 lbs.

Hometown: Golden, CO

Favorite Treat: Anything That Doesn't Move

Favorite Activity: Getting Belly Scratches

Pet Peeve: People Who Don't Share Food

Favorite Place: Telluride, CO



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Every other week for two hours, Levi and Louie wander the airport – with Louie in a “Pet Me” vest – as part of the Canine Airport Therapy Squad (that’s right: CATS). All teams must be certified for the work by the nonprofit Alliance of Therapy Dogs.

There are more than 100 dogs – and yes, one cat – who participate in America’s largest airport therapy animal program. “They’re there to excite and delight our passengers,” said Karla Grahn, volunteer program manager at DIA. “The Labs always have a smile on their faces, so they’re always a very welcoming committee.”

Because Labs are the most popular breed in America, many travelers fawn over Louie and tell Levi about their dogs at home. Even though she gives each of his fans a trading card (Pet Peeve: Being Ignored), they often want to snap a selfie with him. “This dog gets his picture taken more than Kate Moss,” she said with a laugh. “It’s just amazing.”

Jon Pitt, who volunteers on the CATS team with his yellow Labs Buddy and Deuce, agreed that therapy dogs are a hit with passengers and employees. Many airport employees collect CATS trading cards and check social media to see when and where each CATS team will be each day, which surprised him. “One of the first shifts I was out there and someone came running up to me and

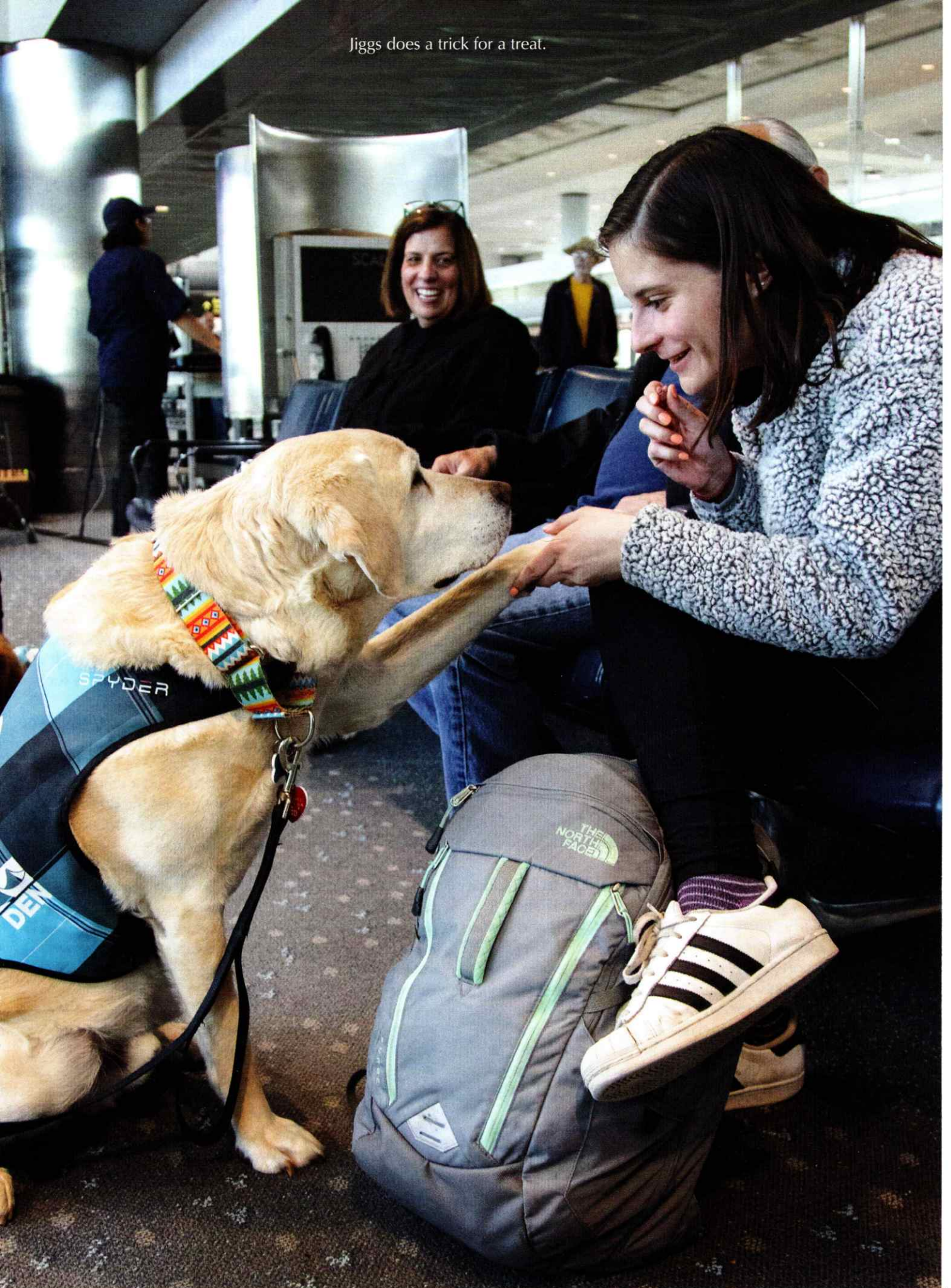
said, ‘Is this Buddy?’” he recounted. “I thought, ‘How did you know that?’”

Pitt said he enjoys meeting interesting people, and his Labs, who volunteer separately per the rules, look forward to their work at DIA. “They just love being petted,” he said. “They both get an extraordinary amount of treats while they’re out there. And we conclude their shifts with a hamburger at McDonald’s, and believe me, by the end of the shift, they’ve kind of got an internal clock going. I get a kick out of it.”

Being food-motivated is one reason Labs can be terrific therapy dogs. Pitt has had numerous Labs over the years, so he appreciates how eager they are to please. “They’re typically hard-wired for seeking positive reinforcement, so a pet or a treat goes a long way,” he said. “Labs are easier to train, and they’re generally calm – particularly adults – which are both really conducive to being a therapy dog.”

Janie Clark said her black Lab, Pesto, excels as an airport therapy dog because he adores children. He’ll even let little kids take his leash and “walk” him. “If there are crying children, he can make them stop crying, and then I’ll give them one of his cards,” she said. “He’s a hero.”

Jiggs does a trick for a treat.





Yeah... Jiggs sort of likes his job.

CATS teams regularly participate in about 40 community events each year, such as the Denver Dumb Friends League Furry Scurry, Pet Aid Colorado's Mutts and Models, and Denver Human Services Children's Adoption Day.

The airport itself also hosts many special events, which provides additional volunteering opportunities for CATS teams. Summertime's Fly Away Fridays offer free entertainment like musicians, caricature artists, puppet shows, and giant board games in the open-air plaza or main terminal. During Super Bowl weekend, DIA hosts a Puppy Bowl with adoptable pups from a local shelter playing football on a miniature field.

Clark and three fellow handlers who call themselves the "Cuatro Gatos," a.k.a. "Four CATS," have fun pulling up together to special events with their Labs and a golden retriever.

"We look like a clown car when we unload," she quipped.

Clark said special events are her favorite part of volunteering with Pesto. They got to meet wonderful families – and "Iron Man" and "Edward Scissorhands" – at the Special Olympics Plane Pull. At the event, teams work together to see who can pull a FedEx airplane the farthest.

Another highlight is United Airlines' Fantasy Flight, which offers kids served by five charitable organizations a direct flight to "The North Pole" during the holidays. Clark and Pesto have volunteered at the event for years, and in 2019, they were even allowed to board the plane.

"The whole inside of the plane is decorated, and everybody's dressed up," she recalled. "We're in the air a good hour and then the pilot comes on and asks everyone to pull down their window and we pull into the hangar where there's games, gifts, Santa, and Mrs. Claus. Each child got to meet with them, have their picture taken, received gifts... oh my gosh! It's unbelievable. The airport is such a steward of goodwill."

Of course, the therapy dogs who volunteer as CATS are an integral part of that.

"It doesn't matter who you are; everybody loves the dogs," she said. "They're all favorites. They're all wonderful dogs." 

For more information, visit flydenver.com/cats. Note: Research on this article began prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, which has already deeply impacted the airline industry as well as our society at large. Just Labs is grateful to everyone who has worked to make travel a pleasant and safe experience in the past, and we look forward to reaching new heights in the future.

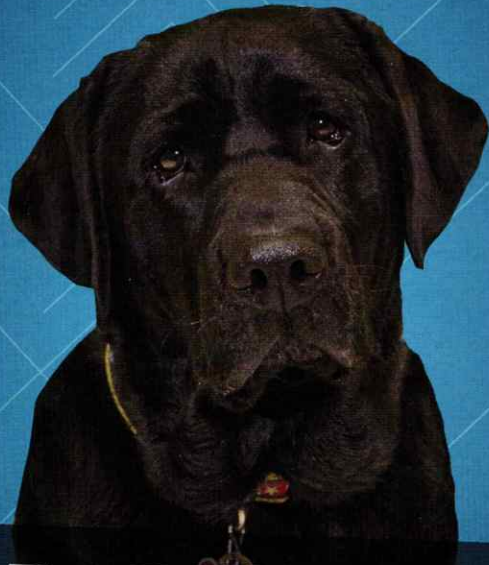


For more information, visit: wd4c.org or Rescues2theRescue.org.

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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.



CATS



LOUIE

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LOUIE

Breed: Labrador Retriever

Date of Birth: 6/20/2014

Weight: 80 lbs.

Hometown: Lafayette, CO

Favorite Treat: Food

Favorite Activity: Swimming & Begging

Pet Peeve: Being Ignored

Favorite Place: In Bed With My People Parents



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PESTO

Breed: Labrador Retriever

Date of Birth: 7/16/2010

Weight: 86 lbs.

Hometown: Aurora, CO

Favorite Treat: Anything

Favorite Activity: Lying in the Sun

Pet Peeve: When Mom Won't Get Up

Favorite Place: Wherever Mom Is



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PESTO

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