



DEDICATED DENVER

Meet the service dog who's changed the lives of a teen and her family

By Jen Reeder

On weekends, Southern California teen Elle Davis heads to her basketball class. Every 15 minutes or so, the 14-year-old leaves the court to head into the stands to drink water and pet her service dog, Denver, who shows his support by kissing her face to lick off the sweat. The noise and commotion in the gym could potentially be overwhelming for someone with autism, anxiety, ADHD, and epilepsy—but with Denver watching her play, the class

is a ton of fun for Elle.

When asked what her basketball class would be like without Denver, Elle says, “Not good—because I would not be doing it.”

It’s just one example of the positive impact Denver has made on Elle’s life, according to her mom, Julia Davis. In fact, the entire Davis family—which includes her husband, Rob, who serves in Space Force; sons Will, 19, and Zach, 17; and a Poodle mix named Penny—adores Denver.



Denver is more than just a comfort to Elle. "He's a great addition to the family," says Elle's mom, Julia Davis.

"Denver is nothing short of amazing," Julia Davis says. "He is the best dog ever."

Being of Service

Elle partnered with Denver—a Labrador Retriever–Golden Retriever mix trained by the nonprofit Canine Companions—in August 2023 after

meeting a friend's service dog. Prior to the partnership, Elle had difficulty sleeping through the night because of anxiety about having a seizure while in a separate room from her family. But with Denver sleeping in her bed, whenever she woke up and felt anxious, she could pet his soft ears until she fell back asleep.

Denver's main job is to help keep Elle's anxiety low and regulate behaviors. For instance, he's trained to distract and redirect her from picking at her skin or nails by nudging her with his nose.

"Every kid gets exhausted and tired of hearing their mom's voice over and over and over again," Julia Davis says. "But a cute dog bumping (you), you've got to listen to that."

The dedicated dog makes Elle's chores and daily routine more enjoyable. He can pull open a clothes drawer when it's time to get dressed for bed. He essentially only barks on command—and Elle loves to hear him bark—so Elle's mom can promise to ask Denver to *speak* as a reward for, say, brushing her teeth.

The confidence Denver brings also means Elle is more willing to leave the house. Earlier this year, Elle and her canine companion enjoyed a Disney cruise, where she was able to meet a dozen beloved characters like Minnie Mouse, Goofy, and Pluto.





Denver is "Mr. Personality," according to Julia Davis.

"I could wait in line for characters because I can pet him and get that anxiety off me," Elle explains.

It was a completely different experience from when the family took a Disney cruise three years earlier, before Elle had partnered with Denver.

"I remember she got so overwhelmed the whole time and wouldn't wait in line to see the characters. Just very antsy, tons of meltdowns because of everything going on," Julia Davis recalls.

"Then we went with my dad three months ago, and Denver came with

us. Elle went everywhere. We had zero behavioral issues the whole entire time. It was a night and day difference having Denver there and just having that support. It is amazing what she can do with him there now."

Offering Independence

Denver is one of over 400 service dogs provided to children with autism by Canine Companions, according to Kyle Kensing, manager of public relations and marketing for the Southwest region of Canine Companions.

"The number one goal of Canine Companions is helping people achieve a more independent life," he says. "Providing that sense of calm is one of the major benefits that a Canine Companions service dog provides."

The nonprofit, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, provides service dogs to children with physical or cognitive disabilities, adults with physical or auditory disabilities, and veterans with PTSD, in addition to facility dogs for handlers working in hospitals, schools, and in law enforcement.



Denver and the Davis family live on a military base in San Pedro, California.

Canine Companions works with Labradors, Golden Retrievers, and crosses of the breeds because they have the “greatest success rate” in performing a variety of tasks—from opening doors and picking up items around the home, to waking veterans from night terrors, to alerting someone who is deaf when an alarm goes off, Kensing notes.

Naturally, living a more independent life can lead to more opportunities for fun. Since partnering with Denver, Elle has forged a friendship with Nigel Gulliver, 15, who also has autism and epilepsy. They play in the same basketball class and head out on adventures with their moms, from nature hikes and beach trips to movies and dinners at restaurants like Chuck E. Cheese, according to Nigel’s mom, Angela Gulliver.

“They just really look out for each other, and they hold hands and they make each other laugh,” she says.

She’s been impressed by the close bond Elle shares with Denver and the way he brings comfort, safety, and joy to the teen and her family.

“When we hang out or we go to their

house, Denver’s always there and I see the comfort that he gives Elle. But he’s also goofy and fun,” Gulliver says. “He’s fully functional (as a service dog), but an awesome dog on top of that.”

Seeing Elle and Denver interact has opened her eyes to how impactful a service dog can be for a person with special needs and deepened her admiration of the Davis family.

“I just think that they’re an incredible family that will leave no stone unturned and make sure that they’ve researched every single thing—and do that—in the best interest of Elle,” she says. “Integrating Denver into their lives is just another example of that.”

Responding to Seizures

Although Denver wasn’t trained as a medical alert dog, he intuitively started responding to Elle’s seizures because they share such a strong connection, according to Julia Davis.

“When she does have a seizure, he is right there in her face. She stops breathing. And so he’s sitting there licking her face like, ‘Come on, breathe, breathe, breathe,’” she says.

“He’s just licking her and nudging her and trying to get her to wake up. Then when she does come to, he gives her that deep pressure therapy and he’s right there, right on her. And he doesn’t leave her side until she’s fully better. For an hour or so afterwards he’s clung to her.”

The loyal dog also stays by Elle’s side whenever she is hospitalized due to her epilepsy, which has happened frequently over the last year and a half.

“The last one, we were in the hospital for almost a month between three different brain surgeries,” Julia Davis says. “Denver was there the whole time with us, and it wasn’t a traumatizing experience for Elle. We were there forever, and she didn’t think twice about it. That distraction, that sleeping with her, being there, giving her ‘loves’ when she was not feeling well, being there to play with ... he’s been there every step of the way.”

Happy at Home

Back at home, Denver loves cuddling with Elle for naps or hogging the beanbag chair dubbed “Big Joe” with his belly up in the air. He and the family’s other dog, Penny, tug a stuffed bear and enjoy chomping on ice cubes together.

While Elle believes her dog is usually “the best of the bestest boys,” he can sometimes be naughty, which she finds amusing. For example, he recently managed to steal two loaves of pumpkin bread that were cooling on the kitchen counter, quickly eating them with Penny.

It wasn’t his only infraction.

“Once, when I was getting a book, he ate my toast, but I caught him mid-act,” Elle says.

The family often jokes that Denver likes breakfast food the best. But Elle knows what her dog truly likes best: “Me.”

For more information about Canine Companions, visit canine.org. **FD**

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

Courtesy Julia Davis