

in their
Debt

By Jen Reader

Charlie's first public access trip.



Pawsitive Perspective

Loyal Lab Charlie works with teen Ruby Ardolf to inspire their fans online and in real life.

ANGIE ARDOLF



Angie, Ruby, and Charlie



Ruby and Charlie at the mall.

A teen named Ruby and her service dog, Charlie, are inspiring others to embrace inclusion and kindness. Ruby and Charlie were both popular before they partnered together last year. Ruby, 16, has a sunny disposition as well as Stromme Syndrome, a rare condition that causes vision impairment, slowed growth, and developmental issues. When Ruby's mom, Angie Ardolf, posted a video of Ruby on Instagram in 2017, it went viral.

"I realized that people really want to learn about disabilities and differences," Ardolf said. "Social media is kind of a safe place to look and to ask questions so that hopefully when you go out into the world, you don't need to stare, you don't need to ask intrusive questions of a person just trying to live their life. By showing Ruby's day-to-day life, including some of the challenges that she faces, we strive to help people see that individuals with disabilities are worthy of a more inclusive and accessible world."

Meanwhile, a yellow Lab/golden retriever puppy was training to be a service dog with Pawsitive Perspectives Assistance Dogs (PawPADs), a nonprofit based in Lakeville, Minnesota. Charlie and his siblings were learning how to help people with mobility issues and detect blood sugar fluctuations in people with diabetes; service dogs at PawPADs get to choose their job.

College interns helped raise and train Charlie on the River Falls campus of the University of Wisconsin through the nonprofit's ADEPT program. He could be a little rambunctious – one intern affectionately nicknamed him Charles Barkley because he liked to bark so much – but ultimately charmed his handlers, according to Linda Ball, founder and executive director of PawPADs.

"Charlie had some good adolescent shenanigans, but he also has this magic about him that just made every intern, and pretty much anyone who ever met him, totally fall in love," she said. "And whenever he comes up in discussion, I always hear the word 'perfect.'"

In June of 2020, Ruby and Charlie finally had the chance to meet. Ruby's beloved black Lab, Stella, had died the previous year. The sweet dog had been part of the family since Ruby was four years old, and the two enjoyed cuddling together.

"Stella just opened our hearts to the idea that a service dog would be such an amazing gift for Ruby down the road," Ardolf said.

When Ruby and her mom arrived at PawPADs partner camp for a two-week training session for handlers and service dogs, they didn't know which dog they'd be taking home. Ball had a couple of potential pups, including Charlie, but wanted to see how interactions went during the first few days. It soon became clear that Ruby and Charlie were a perfect match.

"They both have this zest for life," Ball said.

During camp, pandemic protocols were in place while five teams worked together. Ball recalled a time when the Ardolfs were training with Charlie in one corner of the room, and suddenly everyone heard Ruby say, "I love you, Charlie."

"Everything stopped, and we all melted," Ball said. "They have such a good connection."

That connection has only grown stronger during the pandemic since Ruby and Charlie are together so much. Charlie knows around 80 cues, and though Ruby doesn't actually need help with many of his skills, they still practice just for fun.

For instance, if Ruby needs her mom to change a movie or song on her iPad, she can give the device to Charlie, who will carry it to and fro. Ruby could just carry it herself, but Charlie enjoys getting praise and treats for a job well-done.

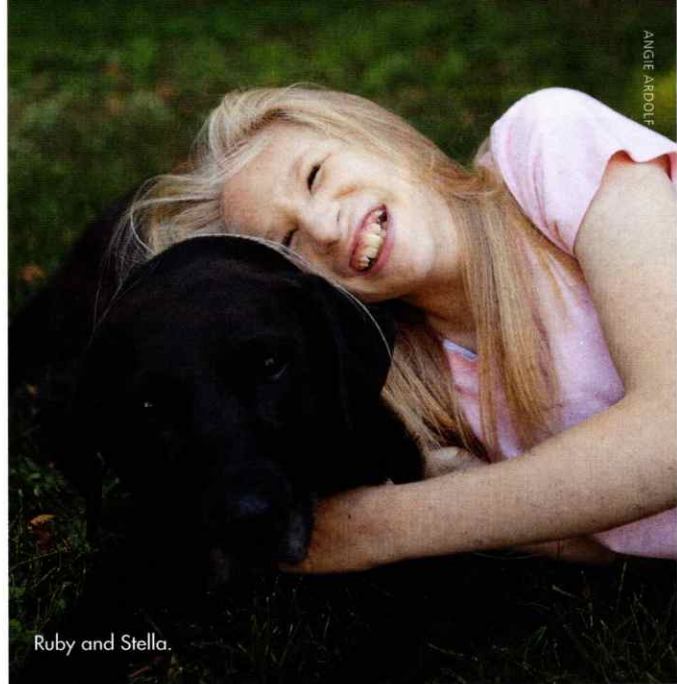
"He's very, very loyal to Ruby," Ardolf said. "He follows her around. He always wants to be by her."

If Ruby is feeling anxious, Charlie knows to "squish" – lie on top of Ruby to apply calming pressure. If she drops something, like a napkin or a toy, it can be difficult to find with her vision impairment, so the Lab quickly fetches the item and brings it to her.

"One way that he's really helped Ruby is in her speech," Ardolf said. "She really needs to be concise and really enunciate words correctly to get him to do what she wants. That has helped her so much because she gets that feedback from him doing the right thing."

Ruby and Charlie have been practicing walking together at the mall – without Ardolf also holding the leash, which helps increase Ruby's independence. But perhaps the best thing about the partnership is innate.

"I think that having a best friend at home for Ruby during the pandemic has been amazing for her," Ardolf said. "She hasn't gotten to see a lot of her friends for a long time, and so he's always there for her."



Ruby and Stella.

Ardolf launched a website at AngieAndRuby.com with a blog as well as a line of disability and Braille awareness clothing, jewelry, accessories, and home goods. To give back to the organization that bought Charlie into their family, 100 percent of the proceeds from the PawPADs collection are donated to the nonprofit.

Some of the designs – including the word "love" with Charlie's paw print as the "o" – were created by a teen whose diabetic alert dog, Darby, is Charlie's brother and a fellow PawPADs grad. But the website is about much more than merchandise.

"My goal is to increase acceptance, inclusion, and kindness," Ardolf said.

Charlie and Ruby work toward that goal just by being themselves. Through social media sites like Instagram, where the family has more than 150,000 followers, they inspire their online fans – as well as people who know them personally.

Ball said she is lucky to work at PawPADs with dogs and people, like Charlie and the Ardolfs.

"Ruby is just a bundle of joy. What you see in her videos is her in real life," she said. "Seeing her and Charlie together is something so special." 🐾

For more information, visit: AngieAndRuby.com, [Instagram.com/angieandrubby](https://www.instagram.com/angieandrubby), or www.instagram.com/charliehelpsruby. To learn more about PawPADs, visit: pawpads.org or [Instagram.com/pawpadsorg](https://www.instagram.com/pawpadsorg).



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.