

In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

Good Dogs!

Labs help children with autism through Good Dog! Autism Companions

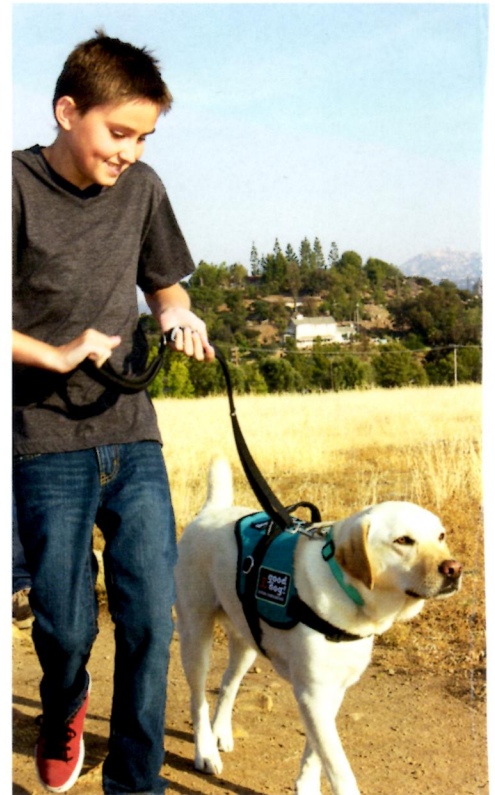
Laura Sylvester shared many of her life's big moments with her yellow Lab, Buddy. When she and her husband Rick got married on a hilltop, Buddy stretched happily beneath their clasped hands as they said their vows to each other. The sweet dog was there for the birth of their son, Elliot – as well as Elliot's diagnosis of autism just before his second birthday.

"Elliot and Buddy had a great relationship," she said. "Buddy would let Elliot sit on him and pet him and love him, and calm him down when he would get worked up."

When Elliot was five years old, Buddy passed away. But his memory helped inspire the Sylvester family to fundraise for a service dog for Elliot.

When he was 10, another yellow Lab entered their life: Orbit. He changed everything.

Laura said that before getting Orbit, the family could draw negative attention when out in public. Elliot might become stressed and shriek or flap his hands, so it was easier if one parent stayed home with him while



the other ran errands such as grocery shopping. But with Orbit, they've found people are more understanding when they see a Lab wearing a vest marked "Service Dog" – and Elliot is more confident and comfortable in crowded places with his dog by his side. In fact, research shows service dogs reduce the stress hormone cortisol in children with autism spectrum disorders.

Laura and Rick realized other families could benefit from having

The Sylvester family with Good Dog Orbit.
(Photos courtesy of IDL Photography by Danielle Laudner;
www.idlphotography.com)



autism service dogs, so they founded the nonprofit Good Dog! Autism Companions in California in 2011.

"We specialize in the bond between child and dog," she said. "Social interaction, bonding, and creating relationships is challenging for our kids. We have to have dogs that eagerly want a relationship with humans, because they have to make up that gap."

Since Labs are such people-oriented dogs, it's not surprising that about 80 percent of the dogs trained in the program are Labs. It's also helpful that they tend to be food-motivated since Good Dog uses only positive training methods.

One important task performed by autism service dogs is to apply calming pressure to children to prevent or aid with a meltdown. Based on the principle behind Temple Grandin's revolutionary "hug machine," dogs are trained to lay their head in a child's lap or even lie on top of them as a sort of canine squeeze machine, she said. They need to be hefty to do the job but also need to have a calm demeanor in case they need to hold the position for a long time.

"It's the size and the pressure and the temperament combined with being treat-motivated that makes the Lab the perfect breed for what we do," Laura said.

When a family is paired with a Good Dog, the parent who will be the main handler goes to Southern California for a week of team training. A key element is "umbilical" training – handler and dog are tethered together for the entire week to promote bonding.

"The Labs love that. 'I have to be with you everywhere you go? You go to the bathroom, I go to the bathroom? You go to the kitchen, I go to the kitchen? You go to bed, I go to bed? Fabulous!'"

Laura said she loves hearing stories of ways Good Dogs motivate kids and families to participate in life more fully. It might be a child who was able to



Good Dog Flinn applies deep pressure to Cameron. (Photo courtesy of Christine Langager)

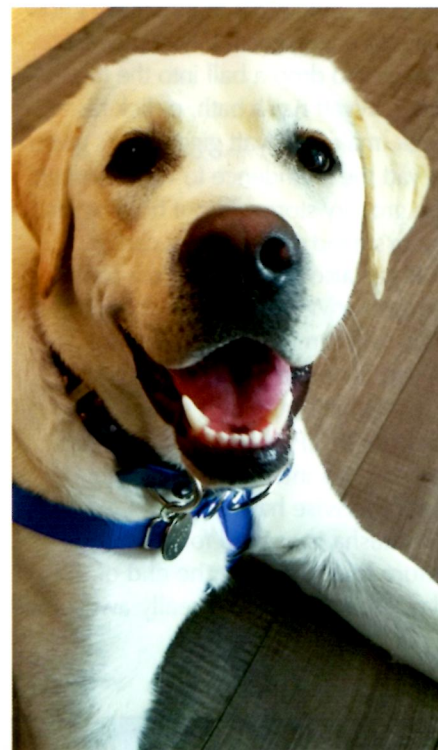
go to Disneyland for the first time, or a family that was able to return to church. One boy started riding the school bus instead of running from it because he likes going to school with his dog.

"Handing over dogs to other autism families is a reward that I can't even describe," Laura said, breaking into tears. "Rick and I feel incredibly blessed to be able to do this as our life's work. When families join us, we say, 'Welcome to the Good Dog family,' and we really mean that – we are a family."

Natasha McIntyre flew from her family's home in Mandeville, Louisiana, to California in July 2016 for Good Dog training with a yellow Lab named Blaze. She wanted to get a service dog for her son, Wyatt, after he was having a hard time in an airport and a woman approached her not with an offer of help, but to ask, "Where are you sitting? Because I don't want to sit by you."

"At that point I started thinking, 'My son has a disability, but his disability doesn't show.'"

Natasha began researching autism service dogs and scheduled a free phone consultation with Laura to learn more. She enjoyed speaking with a fellow "autism mom" but felt



Good Dog Flinn (Photo courtesy of Christine Langager)

intimidated about raising \$13,000 for a dog (Good Dogs cost \$26,000; families are responsible for raising half the money). But thanks to social media, they raised the money in just five days. It was a humbling and healing experience for Natasha and her husband to feel so supported. "It was amazing how people rallied behind us," she said.



Wyatt and Good Dog Blaze (Photo courtesy of Natasha McIntyre)

Blaze has already become an integral part of the family. He not only performs his tasks, but seems to intuitively know ways to engage with Wyatt, now six. He likes to drop a ball into the tub while Wyatt has a bath, or lick his back, making Wyatt giggle. He's given Wyatt the confidence to walk through the grocery store without holding his mom's hand or riding in a cart.

Blaze also helps provide a social bridge for Wyatt to other children, who will run over to pet the dog. Wyatt is nonverbal, but when kids ask, "What's your dog's name?" he can use his iPad app to talk about his dog. It's interaction he might not otherwise have.

Natasha is excited for what the future may hold. "At the end of the day, I feel like it's just really awesome

for my son to have a friend who passes no judgment on him, who will love him unconditionally for all the little quirky things that he does."


Christine Langager brought Good Dog Flinn to her family's home at Marine Corp Base Camp Pendleton (her husband is a Marine) in October 2015. Now Flinn and her nine-year-old son Cameron have an intense bond. Though Cameron has difficulty identifying his emotional state unless it's extreme, he recently recognized he was becoming agitated and signaled to his dog for deep pressure to avert a meltdown.

"It was such a huge moment," she said. "We had a collective boo-hoo on Good Dog's Facebook page."

Before Cameron had Flinn, strangers could be very cruel, telling his parents

to beat their "out of control" child as if he couldn't hear them. But now, Cameron is so proud of his dog that he'll introduce Flinn to strangers, saying things like, "He's my autism service dog. Do you know what autism is?"

"It's been cool to watch Cameron become his own advocate and find his own platform and way of communicating with people," Christine said.

She said Good Dog Flinn has a "pep in his step" that fits perfectly with her family. "He's hilarious and sassy and at the same time so sweet and wise beyond his age," she said. "Flinn has changed not only our son's life but everybody in our family's life. It's just been phenomenal." 



Freelance journalist Jen Reeder is an award-winning member of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and

her husband adopted a loveable Lab mix named Rio. Please share tips for future columns about Labs and working dog organizations that help make our world a better place at: jen@jenreeder.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Or to donate a Lab puppy to Good Dog! Autism Companions, visit: gooddogautismcompanions.org.





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