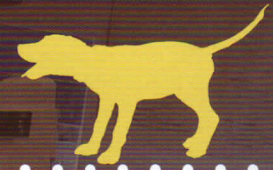


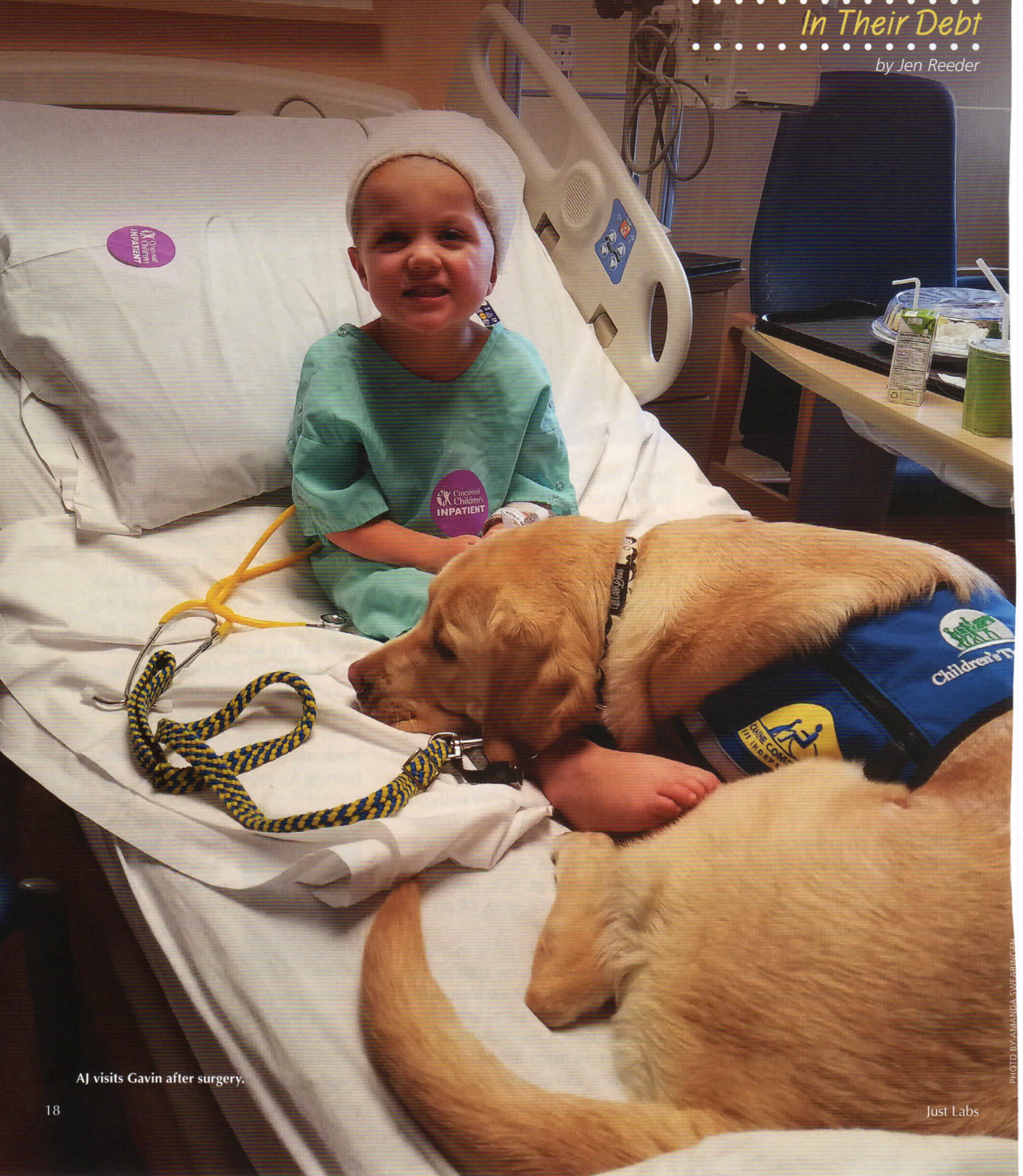
PT Pal

AJ makes physical therapy fun for kids at Children's TherAplay



In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder



AJ visits Gavin after surgery.

Gavin Swearingen's life changed in an instant when he was two years old. A fall from a swing caused a traumatic brain injury, resulting in hemiplegic cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and right-side weakness. He's also a stroke survivor and has "vision cuts" that leave areas in his field of vision black.

It's a lot to contend with, to say the least. But Gavin's life changed again when his parents took him to Children's TherAplay, which offers physical and occupational therapy for children with disabilities. At the Indiana-based nonprofit, kids 18 months to 13 years old ride horses and interact with Service Facility Dog AJ, a Lab mix who helps make challenging therapy exercises fun. Gavin and AJ have been working together for several years.

"AJ has just been a huge impact to Gavin's life," says Gavin's mom, Amanda.

Gavin, now six years old, plays games with AJ that build strength on the right side of his body. He throws balls for AJ to fetch, asks AJ to "jump" up onto a trampoline when it's jumping time, and the two will race each other around cones. As a reward for working hard in physical therapy, Gavin can tell AJ to "tug" off his socks. AJ always makes him giggle with toe kisses.

The little boy might want to stop working when he gets tired, but if he hears something like, "AJ needs you to throw the ball for him," he'll keep going out of love for his pal.

"When you have a medically complex kid, a lot of stuff isn't under their control. People tell them what to do and where to work. It gets really exhausting for them,"

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Gavin and AJ.

Amanda explains. "AJ has given Gavin a responsibility, and it's a motivating factor for him, because now suddenly he's in charge, and he has to do all these new things for a dog."

In February of 2017, when Gavin was scared about an upcoming surgery, he didn't want to go. Then AJ's handler, Teresa Keathley, a physical therapist and clinic supervisor at Children's TherAplay,

Gavin and AJ stroll through the hospital.



asked, "Will you do it if I take AJ to see you?"

"Gavin said, 'Yes, I will,'" Amanda recalls. "So Gavin went through surgery. Teresa and her husband drove to Cincinnati from Indianapolis and brought AJ to Gavin for the day for recovery. That just made such a difference. He got up. He walked AJ around the hallway. He was playing with him on his bed."

Now Gavin is on the waitlist to get a service dog of his own from the nonprofit that raised and trained AJ, Canine Companions for Independence. The Swearingen's learned he was approved for the list just before Christmas of 2017. Gavin was so excited to get a dog like AJ that he told Santa while sitting on his lap, "You don't need to bring me anything for Christmas. I'm getting a dog who can help me."

Gavin is one of approximately 500 children AJ serves each month as the facility dog at Children's TherAplay in Carmel, Indiana. The "kiddos" have

Gavin and AJ during trampoline time.

been diagnosed with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, traumatic brain injuries, and/or development delay.

"I needed a dog who could be high energy and motivating and then the next minute be able to just be relaxed and calm, who could just be really adaptable to our kids' needs," Teresa explains. "That's what AJ does. He's like the icing on the cake. He helps the kids to motivate."

For instance, many of the kids wear leg braces, which can be challenging to use. If they don't want to walk in them, Teresa will simply suggest, "AJ needs to go outside. Let's get his leash and take him outside."

"Pretty soon, they're running around with him and they're not even thinking about their braces that are hurting them," she says. "AJ doesn't pull them or get tangled in them. The kids are really working hard and they don't have any idea – they're just walking the dog. They love it."

AJ wears a special "dressing vest" – made by a child's grandma – that has buckles, buttons, and shoestrings

so that kids can work on those skills. Practicing handwriting can be a tedious activity during occupational therapy, but Teresa says the kids love writing notes to AJ and putting them in a pocket on his vest.

The affable dog knows more than 40 commands, and the children learn and use many of them.

"It really empowers them," she says. "Our kids with Down syndrome can be a little bit stubborn sometimes, and they want to say, 'No' or refuse. It just turns the table when they get to be the one who can control the dog and tell the dog what to do. Pretty soon they're participating, and their participation is a hundred times better than what I could just do with them."

His *tug* command is probably his most popular. When a physical therapist needs to check a child's feet or stretch their legs to see how their braces are working, AJ will "tug" off the socks and give toe kisses, which the kids find hilarious – and distracting.

The three-year-old Lab mix also provides a calming influence when a child is having a meltdown. Sometimes they've had so much fun at Children's TherAplay that they don't want to go home and cry or otherwise act out. Teresa will suggest, "Hey, let's get AJ's leash and walk him out to see Mom." Before they realize it, they're walking to the car to leave.

"He's a rock," Teresa says. "He doesn't react to anything. He is friendly to everybody and loves meeting new people."

At home each night, AJ likes to relax on his memory foam bed. But when there's a long weekend, he starts acting eager to get his vest and return to work because he loves it so much.

It's a love that's returned by the kiddos at Children's TherAplay. Even children with limited verbal skills who rarely speak have spoken to AJ, saying, "AJ, here. AJ, here."

"They're putting two words together when they've never put two words together before," Teresa says. "Their parents are just shocked. It's really sweet how much they will work to communicate with him."



AJ and Teresa Keathley.

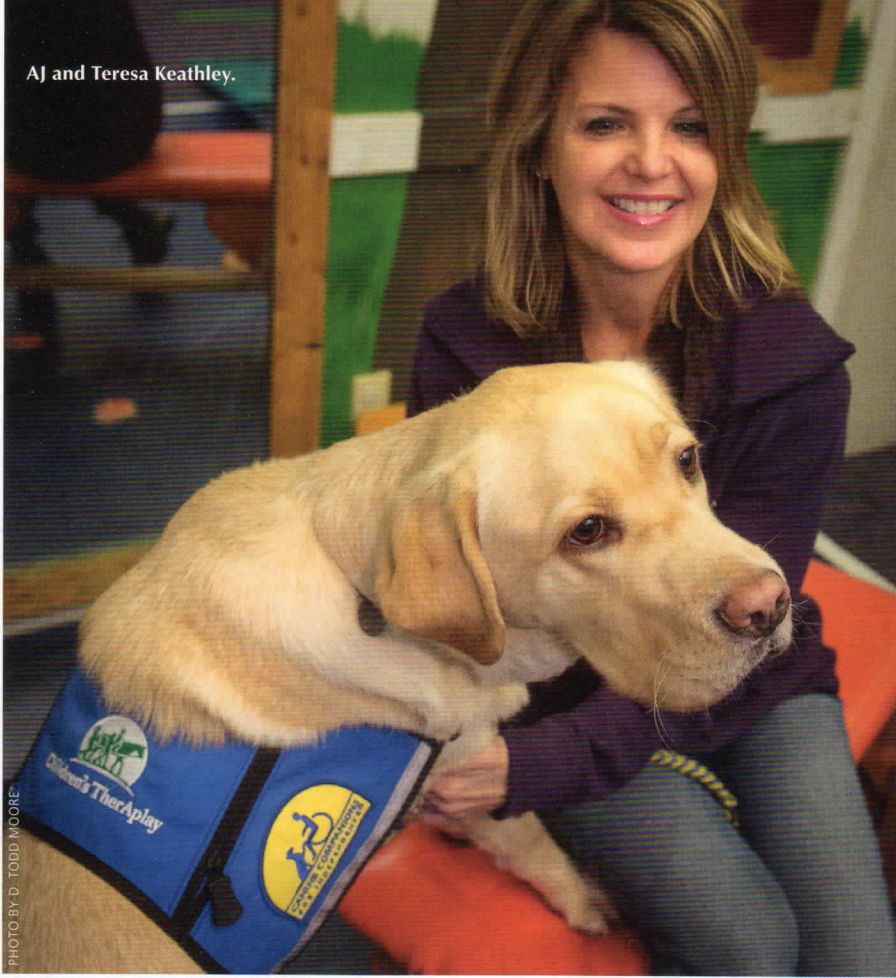



PHOTO BY D. TODD MOORE

Teresa says AJ has taught her to be a better therapist thanks to one of his key skills: patience.

"He's so patient and never gets riled about anything," she says. "He's just so good with the kids – waits on them and loves on them and never gets angry or upset. If we could all be like that, that would be wonderful." 

For more information about the Children's TherAplay Foundation or to make a donation, visit: ChildrensTheraplay.org. For more information about Canine Companions for Independence, visit: cci.org.



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a

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