

Cori and Jodi with Gracie.  
Photo courtesy of Melinda Felton

# Lab Lifeguard

Pup makes waves with canine-assisted swim lessons for kids with special needs



*In Their Debt*

by Jen Reeder

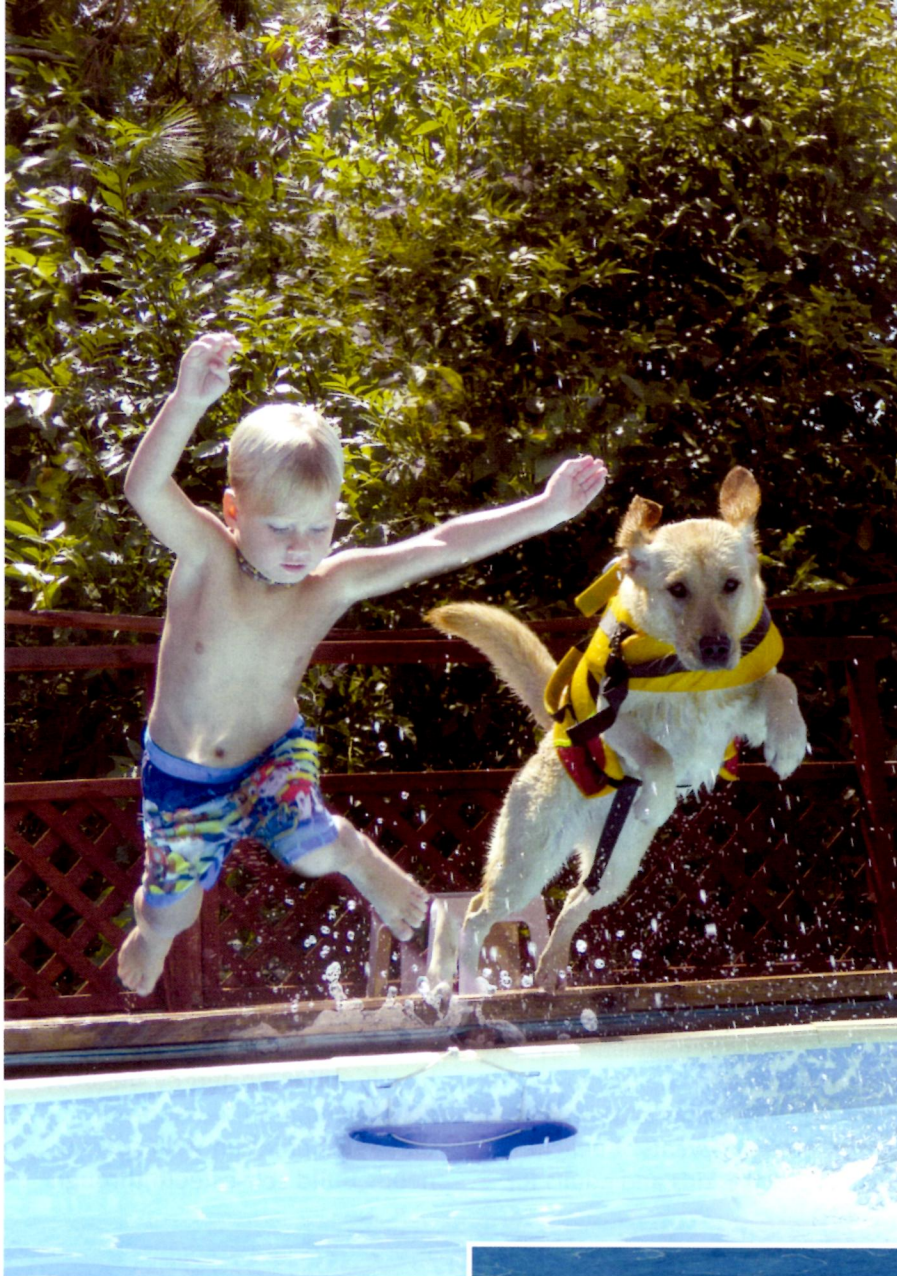
**A**s a puppy, a yellow Lab named Cori was afraid of the swimming pool at her home in Southern California. But eventually she started venturing into the water when the teens next door would come over to swim. At around nine months old, she started acting concerned when they'd both dive underwater; her owner, Judy Fridono, took notice. Then one day a friend came to visit, and while he splashed in the water, the Lab grew so alarmed that she ran from the patio and jumped into the pool to "save" him. From that day on, she was Aqua Dog Cori.

It's apt, because her older "sister" is Ricochet, a 10-year-old golden retriever and "SURFice dog" who surfs with veterans with PTSD and children with disabilities as a unique form of canine therapy. Cori helps out at Ricochet's "Waves of Empowerment" events at beaches that partner the kids and adults for

a day of mentorship and play. The Lab frolics in the ocean and wears a special life vest with handles to tow people to shore.

She was also a hit at a recent beach outing hosted by the Best Day Foundation, a nonprofit that helps children with special needs build self-esteem through





Her first “class” was with a three-year-old boy on the autism spectrum who was screaming and crying in terror at the sight of the pool. Judy asked the child to throw a ball for Cori; when he did, she leapt into the pool and retrieved it. That simple game of fetch became a gateway for a swimming lesson.

“He kept throwing it in, and each time he threw, he was getting closer to the water. Before you know it, he’s in the pool with her – happy and laughing,” Fridono recalls. “Because we had so much success with him we decided, ‘Okay, this is the route we’ll go.’”

Cori is now a canine instructor for Special Fishies: Aquatic Freedom and Education in San Clemente, California. Founded more than 20 years ago by Jodi Powell, the nonprofit swim school offers lessons by donation to children with special needs such as autism, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome.

Powell says each class is customized since every child learns differently, so she’s thrilled to have added canine-assisted swimming to her program. “Judy and I were talking about how teaching a child with autism is like peeling an onion: You don’t know how to get to that next layer, and they can’t always

adventure activities. “Cori naturally just wanted to go rescue everyone,” Fridono says. “If we’re at the beach and a child’s crying, Cori’s literally in the water trying to calm them down.”

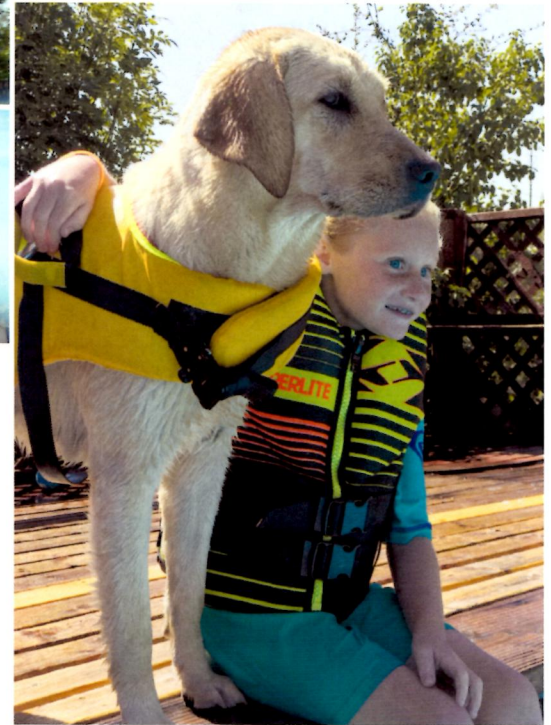
Because Fridono is a fervent believer that people can help dogs find their purpose by listening to them, she started thinking of ways to nurture Cori’s water-safety instincts as well as her “gregarious” personality. When she learned that children with autism have a huge risk of drowning – particularly in Southern California, where there are so many swimming pools and beaches – she realized Cori might be able to help teach children with special needs how to swim.



Just Labs



Like her daughter, Felton loves dogs. In fact, she's always had Labs. "They're such a special breed of dogs. They really are. They love unconditionally, right?" She's grateful to have found Aqua Dog Cori through Special Fishies, and that Powell and Fridono envisioned the way canine-assisted swim lessons could potentially save the lives of children. "With special-needs kids, we really have to think outside the box about



communicate it to you, so sometimes it can take months for them to start to learn to trust me," she says. "We were wondering if maybe a dog could burst through those layers a lot faster than a human being."

That's exactly what happens with Cori – because the dog trusts Jodi, the kids trust Jodi. They have fun jumping into the water with the happy Lab, throwing balls for her to fetch, and learning to kick by holding onto her life vest or floating on a raft with her.

Parents have been in awe of the rapid progress she facilitates. Some students have attended numerous schools and still don't know how to swim by age 10. Then they take a lesson with Cori and everything changes.


Needless to say, requests for swim lessons with Cori are flowing in.

Powell says Cori has even positively impacted her own family. Her eldest son Logan, who is six years old and has sensory processing disorder, loves working with Cori. Thanks to spending time with Cori and Ricochet, he's gained so much confidence in the water that he now surfs in the ocean. "Dogs have that healing nature, and they're able to instill trust eons before we can," she

says. "Cori and the Fishies are keeping us humble. They just keep teaching us things. What they can do is limitless and miraculous."

Melinda Felton says her daughter, Gracie, an eight-year-old with developmental delay and medication-resistant epilepsy, recently had a remarkable swim lesson with Cori. Gracie had fun throwing a ball for Cori, jumping into the water alongside the Lab, and holding onto Cori's vest to learn to kick. "Not only did it make Gracie really comfortable in the water, which is sometimes a lot of the barrier, but being able to hold onto Cori made her trust and feel very, very safe," she says. "It directed her focus onto the swimming."

During the lesson, Cori suddenly changed her behavior. She was trying to warn them that something was wrong: Gracie had a seizure five minutes later. It was a profound realization. "Now we know what Cori is capable of," Felton says. "That was a really special thing to see – not only did she help us get comfortable and trust in the water and help teach the lesson, she also alerted to something bigger that was going on."

how to teach them to do things," she says. "These two women are amazing. I believe in compassion, and I believe we all have something to give. Judy just connected with these dogs – she realized there was so much more in them. I think it's so kind of her to share them with us." 

Visit Cori and Ricochet online at [www.facebook.com/SurfDogRicochet](http://www.facebook.com/SurfDogRicochet). To sponsor a "Special Fishie," visit: [www.specialfishies.org](http://www.specialfishies.org). For more information about Canine Partners for Life, visit: [k94life.org](http://k94life.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 lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).