

Just Labs

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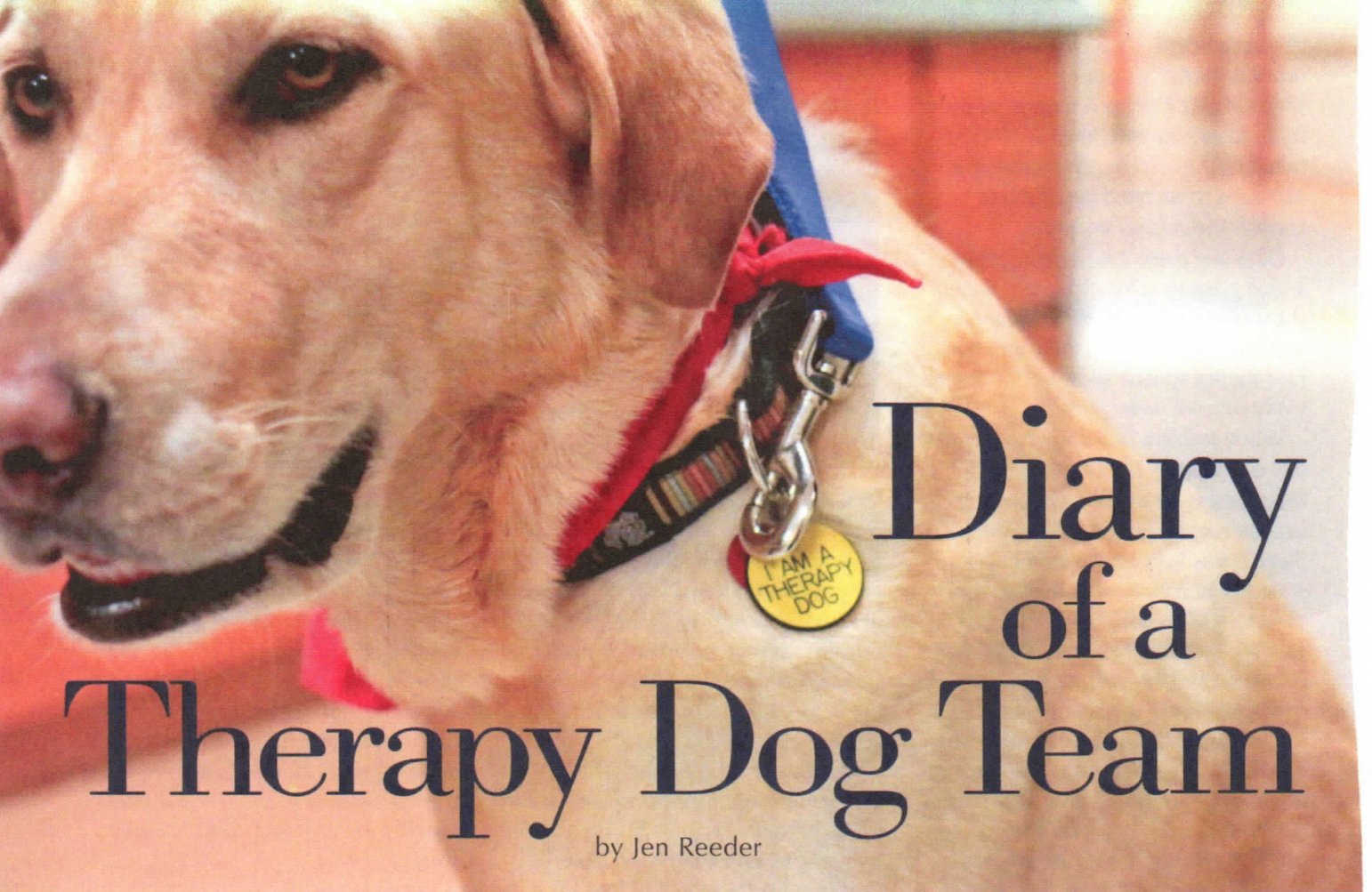
A Celebration of the Labrador Retriever



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Diary of a Therapy Dog Team

by Jen Reeder

JENNAYE DERGE PHOTO

Like so many Lab lovers, I've always known my dog Rio is special. The little yellow Lab mix with soulful brown eyes was only 12 weeks old the day my husband, Bryan, and I met him at an animal shelter. Rio's always had a zest for life, and we've had countless outdoor adventures together.

Rio was also a terrific comfort in 2012 when Bryan needed a kidney transplant, and I was lucky to be able to be his donor. When we were reunited with Rio after the surgeries, he ran to us with full-body wags, kissing our faces as we laughed and cried.

About six months later when I was interviewing therapy dog handlers for a newspaper article in our adopted hometown of Durango, Colorado, I had an epiphany: Rio could help comfort other people, too. I know how stressful hospitals can be, even if you have a successful outcome as we did. The whole goal of therapy dogs is to bring a smile to people who could use one, and Rio was born for the role.

My boy passed the Therapy Dogs International certification test like a champ, and we joined the volunteer Mercy Super Dogs at Mercy Regional Medical Center. Here are excerpts from some of my journal entries about our visits...

10/23/13 – Rio's first visit! Shadowing experienced teams with a papillon and three shelties

Rio sulked during the bath required before visits, but perked up when I tied his bright red therapy dog bandana around his neck while saying, "Therapy!" in a happy voice. I'm glad we got to Mercy 15 minutes early to sniff

Rio greets us after Bryan's kidney transplant.



the grounds and get used to the automatic doors at the entrance. We joined the other teams and headed in – I felt so much glee parading behind all the tails waving like flags ahead of us.

It was emotional right off the bat – three teens were leaving a room and had obviously been crying. They spotted us in the hallway and one said, “Oooh – dogs!” Rio wagged like crazy as they pet him, squirming to lick their faces, which were soon smiling.

I was surprised by how many Lab people made a beeline for Rio or shared stories of Labs. It makes sense because Labs are the most popular dog in America, but I wasn’t expecting it. A big guy in scrubs held up his phone to show me a screensaver of a chocolate Lab named Tug. “Rio and Tug would love to wrestle together,” I said.

“Tug’s no longer with us. I had twelve good years though,” he said. It was hard to fight off tears.

Afterward, we went to a patch of grass outside the hospital and Rio did a happy belly roll, kicking his legs in the air. He’s a natural!

11/14/13 – Third visit: paired with standard poodle, Stella

We visited many people today. Only one person turned us down when we knocked on the door and asked, “Would you like a visit from therapy dogs?”

There were lots of dog people, including a cowboy who told us he used to wrangle 100 horses for Kenny Rogers movies. Another man in the waiting room showed me photos of Titus, a 110-pound chocolate Lab, and photos of his little daughters with the gentle giant. An elderly woman’s face lit up when she saw Rio and told us about her yellow Lab, Maggie, who was a chewer when she was younger. I could relate!

Karen Jarvis, RN, is always happy to see Rio at Mercy Regional Medical Center.

JENNAYE DERGE PHOTO



In the elevator on the way to work!

JENNAYE DERGE PHOTO

2/25/14 – Solo

Rio definitely loves his job! He whimpers with excitement when we first get inside and see Nellie at the front desk.

Every room is different, and the diversity is really cool. We can pop out of the elevator and be greeted by a huge family from the Southern Ute Indian Tribe in the waiting area, then go into a room with a blonde teen and her parents, or a Latino couple, or an adult with Down syndrome, or some crusty biker buddies... but no matter who we visit, Rio is an ice breaker. Even cat people and horse people are happy to meet Rio – an animal lover is an animal lover!

Tonight we had a special time with a man who had just lost his chocolate Lab of 12 years, Mulligan. He took the dog all over the world with him – Bulgaria stood out – and then Mulligan knocked into a table, fell into the man’s arms, and died. “It’s probably lucky, because I never could have put him down,” he said. “It’s the worst thing I’ve ever gone through.” He told me this while he was stroking Rio’s ears, and Rio was leaning into me. “I can’t imagine,” I said (I’m terrified of losing Rio!). On our way out, the man smiled and said, “I feel better.”

7/24/14

Today’s star of the show was an eight-and-a-half-year-old girl waiting with her mom for her dad to get out of testing. The girl *loved* Rio and told me many times, hugging him and smiling and just tickled by everything that he could do, like shake hands with her. He even offered his belly. I can tell one thing she’ll remember from Daddy’s time at the hospital is meeting the friendly dog.

11/25/14 – Two days before Thanksgiving with Sweetie (chocolate Lab who lives up to her name)

It was an intense night. Lots of people told us they’d be



JENNAYE DERGE PHOTO

Charles Costello shares stories of his dog Boss while meeting Rio.



JENNAYE DERGE PHOTO

Rio bonds with Benjamin Lowder while he visits his father in the hospital.

home for Thanksgiving, while sad family members silently shook their heads behind them. But Rio and Sweetie spread a lot of cheer. There was the heartbroken father of the toddler bitten on the face by the family dog (“He’s a good dog, she just doesn’t understand that you can’t pull on dogs”); the Eastern European woman who kept patting Rio’s head and exclaiming, “I love you! I love you!”; and the little girl who giggled when Rio kissed her doll. Several people took photos of us on their phones to show off their surprise “visitors.”

2/3/15

Very moving experience: meeting a man with extremely red, bloated legs. He had a monitor on one of his toes. So Rio kissed the other toes (the patient assured me it didn’t hurt at all). Then he kissed the man’s hand as he reached to pet him.

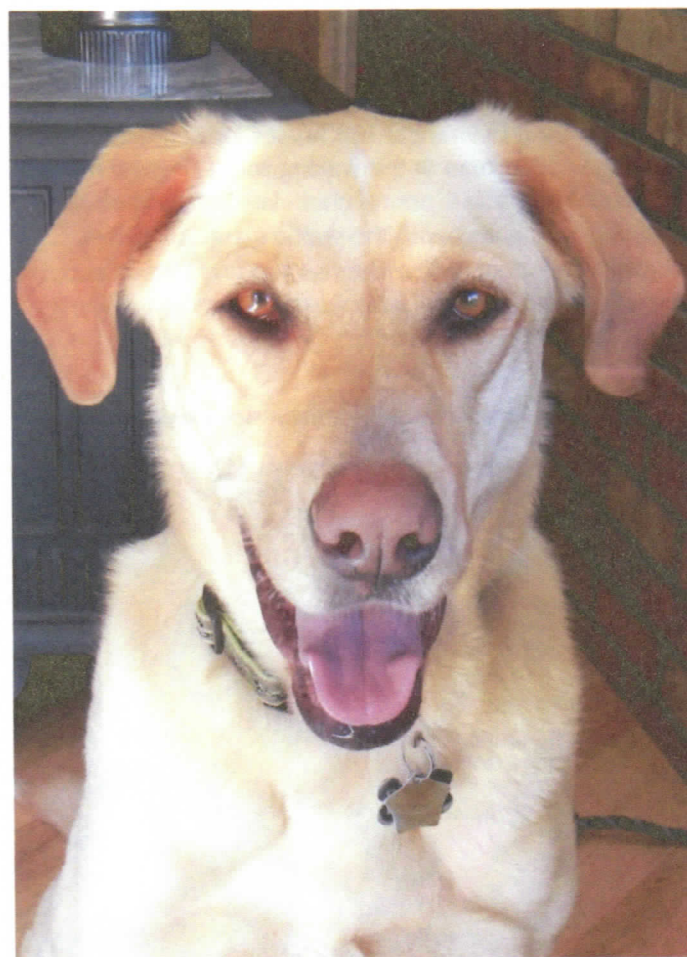
We ran into a woman carrying a Chihuahua, and she told us, “Go visit room twelve.” Inside was a man with five Labs at home – yellow, chocolate, and black (“The rainbow!”) – who shared stories about his Labs riding on tractors and snowmobiles with him, a Lab puppy that would jump on the trampoline with his daughter, a friend’s Lab who never left his child’s side after a car accident. “I have a kind place in my heart for them.” I feel so connected to the Labrador retriever community on our visits!

2/20/15

Busy night! One highlight: A guy with oxygen tubes in his nose showed me photos of his blue heeler, Camo, and his horses. “Horses, dogs – livin’ life like I find each day,” he enthused. It dawned on me, *That’s how Rio lives his life – like all dogs do, actually.* The guy scratched Rio’s chin and said fondly, “Dogs.”

It means so much to be able to share my boy and see him boost people’s spirits. I’m so glad he’s touched not only my life, but so many others! 🍗

To learn more about Therapy Dogs International, visit: <http://tdi-dog.org/>.



Rio’s therapy ID photo: Rio smiles for his TDI certification card photo. The ID card cannot be used to try to gain special public access for Rio since he’s not a service dog. Therapy dogs offer comfort to strangers, while service dogs, such as guide dogs for the blind, are trained to assist their handlers in day-to-day life.