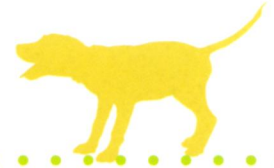




Larry and Norm practice a “go pay,” a command that instructs a dog to take the wallet, put both feet on the counter, and give the wallet to the cashier.



In Their Debt

by Jen Reeder

“I term it as a ‘hallelujah moment’ for me in my life,” Crane said. “All of the sudden I regained my independence.”

Because Charity would warn Crane of an impending seizure, he could avoid injury by lying down to avoid a fall – even if he had to lie down in a mall, he’d do it. After Charity’s death, he partnered with a yellow Lab named Alepo who not only alerts to his seizures, but wears a harness that Crane can grasp to help him stand and walk due to balance issues from years of seizures. Alepo can also turn on (and off) lights and dial a special phone that calls Crane’s sister in an emergency. Now the two are inseparable, whether to travel, attend music concerts, or take part in the annual Epilepsy Awareness Day at Disneyland.

“Epilepsy is still a challenge in many ways, but freedom is what I’ve gotten back – all because of Alepo and Canine Partners for Life,” Crane said.

Alepo and Charity are two of the 82 seizure alert dogs placed by Canine Partners for Life since 1994. The nonprofit breeds and trains primarily Labs to work as service dogs for people with physical, developmental, and cognitive disabilities – they’ve graduated 650 service and companion dogs since 1989 – and is one of the only organizations in the country offering seizure alert dogs.

“We’re pretty sure that the dogs are picking up on a change of scent that’s being emitted from the body, but we don’t honestly know exactly how they do it,” said Tonya Guy, associate director of marketing and communications for Canine

Alerting Angels

Labs train to warn people of impending seizures and cardiac events

Ed Crane’s life changed dramatically the day he met a Lab. He was depressed from a 14-year battle with epilepsy, which included a brain surgery that helped him reduce the occurrence of seizures to several times a week instead of several times a day, but the surgery left him with short-term memory loss and chronic pain.

Fortunately, a friend suggested he look into obtaining a seizure-alert dog from the Pennsylvania-based nonprofit Canine Partners for Life. On his first visit, Crane was playing and bonding with a black Lab named Charity when she suddenly stopped,

stood right in front of him, and started rubbing her head on his legs. The staff suggested he lie down on a mat, and 20 minutes later, he suffered a severe grand mal seizure. When he came to, disoriented, a witness explained what had happened.



PHOTO BY PETER FORBSTER

Others will pick up on it right away," she said. "Once we know a dog has that capability, it's just positively reinforcing it from there."

They've found each dog alerts with the same amount of warning each time; if a dog alerts 10 minutes before a seizure, he'll always alert 10 minutes before a seizure. Some will nudge or paw their person, while others stop listening to commands and stare at their handler intensely.

After they're matched with a human, the team spends three weeks training together at Canine Partners for Life's 45-acre facility. Though each dog's care and training costs around \$30,000, the nonprofit asks for a donation of \$1,000-\$3,000 from a handler, and no one is denied a dog for financial reasons so long as they can cover veterinary care and food costs.

Guy said seizure alert dogs make a huge difference in people's lives, from being able to move away from home to attend college to showering alone without someone standing by in case of a seizure.

"Good things come from this warning," she said. "It's just amazing."

She said the nonprofit works mainly with Labs because they are food motivated, a good size for mobility assistance – "we need a large dog to be able to turn on light switches and reach to pay cashiers" – and because of their positive temperament and reputation.

"Labs are received well by the public, so it's just one less barrier," she said. "Graduates use the dogs not only for physical support, but also as a social tool."

Courtney Simmons and Zido.

Volunteer puppy raiser Elizabeth with a future star.

Partners for Life. "It's an innate ability."

The nonprofit has about 70 puppies in their first year of obedience training at any given time. Foster families as well as inmates at 10 prisons in Pennsylvania and Maryland help socialize and train them in basic obedience. In their second year of specialized training, they take turns spending a weekend with a charitable man who has multiple seizures a day so he can identify potential seizure alert dogs.

"Some dogs will sleep right through a seizure.

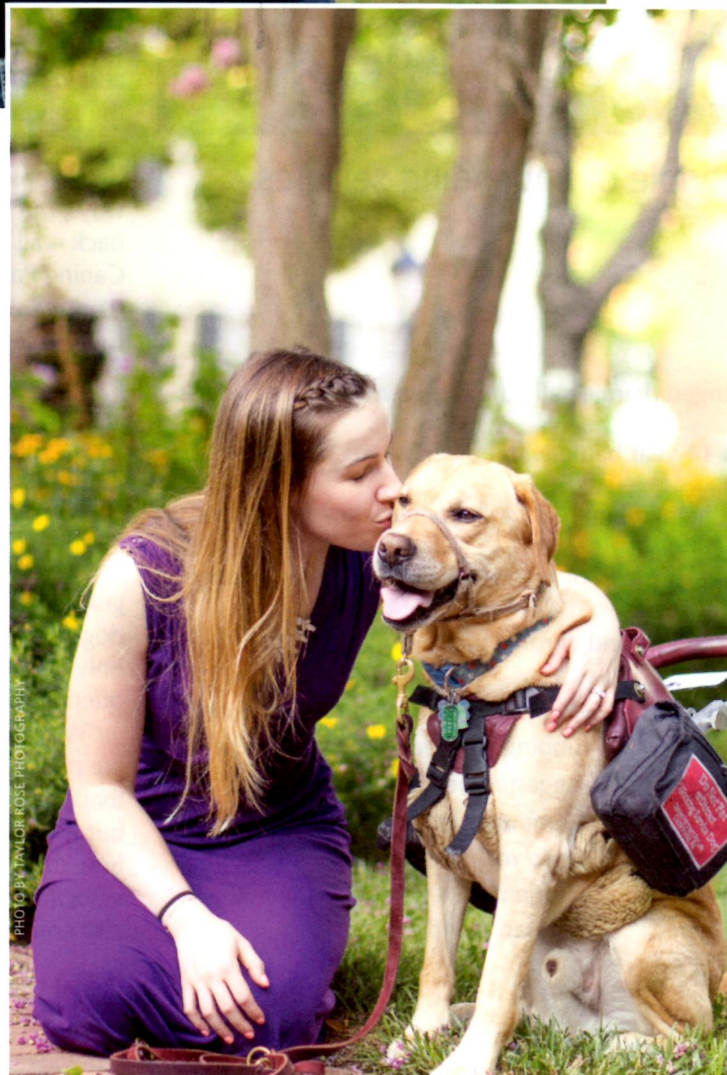


PHOTO BY TAYLOR ROSE PHOTOGRAPHY

ncredibly, the nonprofit also trains Labs for a very unusual job: cardiac alert dogs. The Labs can warn their person when they're about to lose consciousness from heart conditions such as *cardiac syncope*, in which a person's blood pressure drops so precipitously that they pass out.

"With the warning, the people can lie down and elevate their legs, which will cause them not to lose consciousness," Guy said. "To our knowledge, we're the only accredited organization in the country training cardiac alert dogs."

In 2014, Virginia resident Courtney Simmons partnered with a cardiac alert dog – a yellow Lab named Zido. She has a neurological condition that causes her heart rate to speed up until she loses consciousness. It started when she was 10 years old, and by her 20th birthday she was having episodes almost every week. Neurologists said they didn't have a name for the disease but that she'd have it for the rest of her life, and that it would get progressively worse.

"I was going to be living on my college campus, so it really scared me about living alone or away from my parents," Simmons said.

Then she partnered with Zido. If her heart rate increases, he stares at her or licks her purposefully. Sometimes, if she doesn't initially pay attention, he'll do the opposite of what she asks. When she gets the message, she sits down, and he will either sit in her lap or nudge her until she lies down – then he'll lie on top of her.

"It's a nice focus point to help calm my heart rate back down," she said. "Then when he senses that my heart is back to normal, he will stand up and we just keep going on our day. He's given me and my whole family a new sense of relief and freedom, and just overall joy."

Thanks to Zido's interventions, Simmons hasn't fainted since she took him home from Canine Partners for Life. When she graduated with a 3.99 GPA from George Mason University in 2016, Zido walked alongside her in a little cap and gown as she accepted her diploma. He's also been at her side as she's started a full-time job and become engaged – naturally, he'll be the "dog of honor" at her wedding.



Alepo working with Ed.

"My neurologist said that this dog has done what none of the top neurologists who worked on me could do. Through those alerts, he has retrained my heart almost – he's helped my body learn a new normal," she said. "I think I've done more in the last two and a half years with Zido than I did in the twenty-one years leading up to having him.... He's my little sidekick and best friend. He's my first Lab, and I'm completely hooked now. I love him."



For more information about Canine Partners for Life, visit: 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.



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