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# At your service: Dogs help humans live fuller lives — and sometimes play role of hero



Ben Simon

**W**alk into Duo Dogs near Maryland Heights and you'll see trainers teaching dogs how to turn on a light switch. You'll see trainers swinging around in a wheelchair with a dog at their side. You'll see makeshift stairs and hospital beds. This is the world of a dog training facility.

When service dogs were first introduced in the United States after World War I, they were designated for the visually impaired. But over time, their role has expanded.

Today, according to the Americans With Disabilities Act, service dogs are defined as having been “individually trained to do work or perform tasks for an individual with a disability.” This includes everything from mobility dogs to hearing dogs to seizure alert dogs to peanut-sniffing dogs for those with allergies. Some service dogs steady their clients and

help them get up stairs. Some work with people affected by post-traumatic stress disorder. Some even learn how to detect abnormal blood sugar levels.

“I get people all the time that will be like, ‘Oh, it’d be really cool if my dog would bring me a bottle of water,’” said Kevin Hill, the executive director of St. Louis Huggs, a local training organization. “But I’m like, you don’t have any mobility issues, you’re not training your dog to be your assistant or your servant. This needs to be based on a disabled-related need.”

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Trained service dogs go beyond what you may think of. Many St. Louis-based organizations produce dogs that comfort patients in a hospital or lie next to sexual assault survivors as they testify in a courtroom.

Regardless of the role they perform, these working dogs require two years of extensive training. They must learn all kinds of simple and intricate commands. They spend days practicing at the zoo, the airport or maybe an art fair.

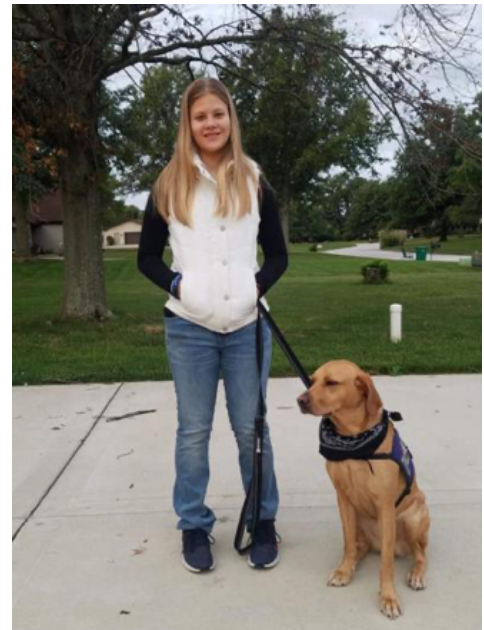
These dogs are workers who save lives in many cases, and here are a few of their stories.

## Diabetes hero

One day in 2019, Elizabeth Kraus of Smithton was lounging by the pool. Her daughter, Bethany, now 14, was splashing around in the water, and their new service dog, Ida, was sprawled out on the deck.

That's when, all of a sudden, Ida bolted up, ran around the pool and nudged her head toward Bethany. Ida is supposed to detect abnormal blood sugar levels in Bethany, who has Type 1 diabetes. But the family didn't know what to do. It was only their second day with the dog. Nothing could be wrong. It was just a beautiful day at the pool.

“I was like, oh my gosh, this is, you know, a \$17,000 dog,” Kraus said. “What's going on?”



Bethany and Ida, a Labrador, pose before their first day of school.

Bethany climbed out of the pool and checked herself with a manual glucose tester. The number read 54, about 50 mg/dL less than when she first got in the pool 25 minutes earlier.

Bethany has “brittle” Type 1 diabetes. This means that her blood sugar levels can take dangerous drops in a matter of minutes without her knowledge. “Death drops,” Elizabeth called them. Drops that can cause her to lose the ability to speak. Drops that can leave her comatose.

For years, Bethany relied solely on technologies that would alert her to the dropping glucose levels. But the devices would beep on a 15-minute delay, and when they did beep, they weren’t always loud enough to get the family’s attention.

Now, whenever Ida smells a severe drop in Bethany’s blood sugar levels, she alerts her. They go everywhere together. To bed. To school. To basketball practice. Ida has gotten the attention of Bethany’s teacher in the middle of class. She has even pulled Bethany out of volleyball games, smelling her plummeting sugar levels from across the gym. Kraus could go on and on with times Ida has saved Bethany’s life.

“Oh my gosh,” she said, “there’s so many.”

## Powerline hero

Judy Burch of Creve Coeur still remembers when a dog saved her life 46 years ago. It was her sophomore year at Mercer University and her first service dog. Since then, Burch, who is blind, has owned seven

service dogs. But none of them has had a story quite like Buffy.

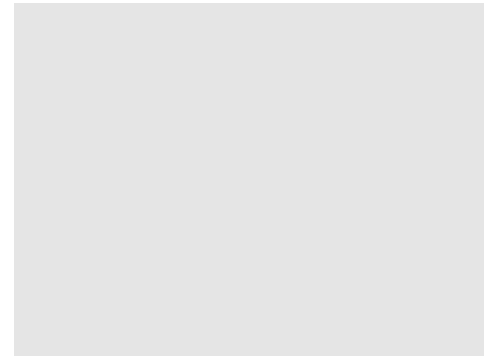
It was a normal day at college. She had just finished her last class and began walking across campus to the student center with her guide dog, Buffy. Burch doesn't remember much else.

"I was in la-la land," she said. Burch did what she always did. She let her dog lead the way.

When Burch and Buffy reached the student center, she found her college adviser waiting at the door. He was breathless. "My heart is in my throat," Burch remembered him saying.

The adviser, Burch learned, had just watched Buffy lead her through a sparking line of fallen power lines from that afternoon's nasty thunderstorm. He didn't know what to say. If he yelled out, Burch could have easily taken the wrong step and electrocuted herself. So he kept quiet and watched Buffy lead them through.

Burch was shocked. She had no idea. But part of her wasn't surprised. She learned in day one of training school: "Always follow your dog." Plus, Buffy had a "memory like an elephant."



Judy Burch with her service dog Buffy, a golden retriever, during her college years.

“The longer you work with these dogs, the more in tune you are with them,” Burch, now 66, said. “They know your movements, you know their movements, and we’re just like a team. They’re your eyes.”

## Mobility hero

Payton Rule was about to roll out of bed when she noticed a problem. Her shoes were on the other side of the room.

Rule had recently received surgery on her feet and couldn’t walk without cast shoes. Unsure of what to do in the middle of the night, Rule woke up her service dog, Whitt.

Whitt is a mobility dog. He supports Rule, who has a neuromuscular disorder called Charcot-Marie-Tooth, as she walks on uneven surfaces, climbs stairs and goes for long walks. But fetching something from the other side of the room? Rule wasn’t sure if Whitt would know what to get among all of the things scattered across the dark floor.

When Whitt heard the “take it” command, he sprung out of bed and walked straight for the shoes. He brought one back. And then the other. In a matter of seconds.

“I feel like he almost speaks English, like he kind of just knows what I need before I even give him the command for it,” Rule said.

It’s these small, everyday tasks that make Rule’s life easier and allow her to experience things she has never experienced before.

Rule, now a junior at Washington University, thinks back to her senior year of high school at the Whitfield School. Before owning Whitt, Rule hadn't attended an event like field day before, where students participate in Olympic-style games. Actually, she had never walked to the athletic fields on her own before. The fields rested at the bottom of a steep hill. But holding on to Whitt's harness, Rule didn't just attend field day: She participated in softball and other activities.

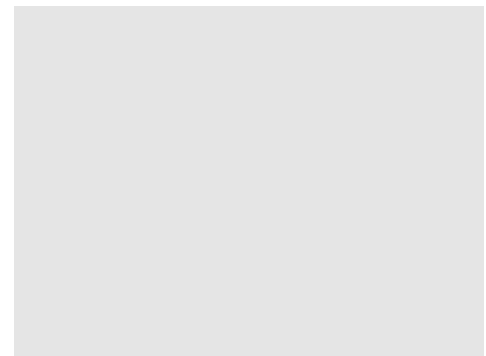
"It can be a little bit nerve-wracking or unsure going to new places," Rule said. "You're just never sure, like: Are there going to be a lot of steps? Or is it going to be like a long walk on uneven ground with a lot of hills and stuff like that? If I have him with me, I don't really have to worry about that quite as much."

## Courtroom hero

For months, Lisa Jones and the St. Louis County prosecutor's office worked with a victim of sexual abuse. No matter how hard they tried, the 9-year-old girl wouldn't share her story.

The prosecutor's office had recently received a facility dog named Levi.

Although he doesn't assist someone with a disability, Levi is trained for the same amount of time, learning how to stay calm for long periods of time and provide comfort to people who



Levi, a Labrador retriever, provides a furry friend for victims to pet as they tell their story.



need it. The prosecutor's office hadn't used him yet. But Jones, the manager of victim services, was running out of options. She decided to give Levi his first case.

When she brought him out, the little girl looked at the blond furry creature and crossed her arms.

"What's he for?" she asked.

"If you don't feel like talking to us," Jones replied, "you can talk to him."

Levi plopped down on the floor and lay next to her. The girl didn't move. She just stared into his dark brown eyes.

Jones stood across the room when she heard some murmuring.

"Do you care if I tell you my secrets?" the girl asked Levi. Jones almost "burst into tears." For the first time, the girl told her secrets to the dog.

When Duo Dogs, a local service dog training organization, initially contacted Jones about hosting a courthouse dog, Jones had her doubts. How much would it really help these victims? It took just this one case for Jones to find her answer.

"I was 100% wrong," said Jones, who has been Levi's primary caregiver over the last two years. "I mean the moment this dog came into our office, it completely changed everything. ... It gives (victims) a boost of

confidence to have this big yellow Lab lying at their feet, and if they get scared or nervous, they just reach down and touch them.”

Levi’s job is quite simple — chill out and let his demeanor do the work. He sits through daily depositions. He gives victims something warm to pet during the grueling hours of jury deliberation. Across the board, Jones has seen a substantial decrease in the anxiety of victims, from children to adults.

“The person that (Levi’s) working with feels like they have the power and control,” Jones said. “And for a crime victim, I think that’s really, really important.”

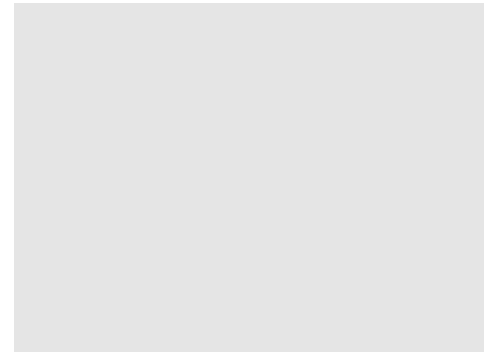
## Independence hero

Ali Chancellor has owned three service dogs in her life. And between each dog, Chancellor has had to wait a few days. Some might enjoy the mini-break from taking care of a dog. But, in those moments, Chancellor felt lost.

“I was like, what do I do with myself?”

Chancellor, 40, said. “I don’t have a dog to walk. This is not good. My whole routine is up a creek.”

Chancellor has cerebral palsy. She uses a wheelchair and has no functionality in her right arm. As a result, her dogs do a little bit of



In her Blues themed wheelchair, Ali Chancellor says hello to her new service dog, a Labrador named Lambo.

everything for her. They help pick fallen groceries off the ground. They help her open doors. They even help her take off her clothes. Before getting a service dog, it took Chancellor hours to get changed, she said. Now it takes 10 minutes.

During those lull periods without a dog, Chancellor, who lives in the Central West End, found that she kept dropping things, with no easy way to pick them back up.

“Every time I drop something, I would just literally cry,” Chancellor said, “because I would be like there’s no one here to pick it up, and I don’t want to do that. Because if I do it and there’s no one here and I fall, then, that’s the end of the story.”

A few years ago, she remembers falling in her bathroom. Growing up, she would just call her parents. But living by herself in her apartment and unable to get back up, she beckoned her dog. The dog went into the other room, grabbed her phone and brought it back. That’s why Chancellor calls the dogs her “security blanket.”

“They’re basically the arm that I don’t have.”

## Diabetes hero

Mary McNeight would go out to a restaurant and feel her brain starting to shut off. She would just stare at the walls through glazed eyes, sweating and unable to respond. “I kind of looked like a drug addict, in all honesty,” she said.

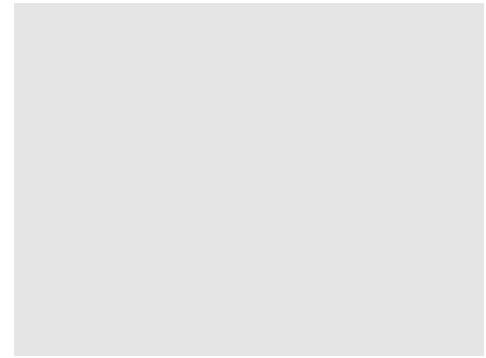
For years, McNeight assumed they were panic attacks. She dreaded leaving the house.

In 2008, she got a dog, Liame. McNeight's ex-husband had diabetes. She taught Liame herself how to detect the drops in his blood sugar. Shortly after, she began teaching others how to train their dogs to do the same.

It was during one of these training classes that McNeight's dog started alerting her uncontrollably. She asked everyone in her class to check their glucose levels, but no one's monitor reported anything unusual. Still, the dog wouldn't stop pawing at her. She thought Liame was "broken."

That's when McNeight decided to test herself. Liame, she noticed, was alerting her. She was the one with low glucose levels. Those episodes in public settings weren't panic attacks. They were low blood sugar episodes. McNeight later learned that she has Type 2 diabetes.

That day changed her life. She started bringing Liame everywhere. Liame would alert her 20 minutes before each episode, preventing those "zombie-like" attacks. It convinced McNeight, 43, to start her own training program, Service Dog Academy, now home-based in Waterloo. But it also gave her the confidence to leave the house again.



Mary McNeight with her first diabetic-alert dog Liame, a Labrador retriever.

The thought of Liame, who died four years ago, still brings McNeight to tears over the phone.

“I went from going nowhere and staying in my house,” McNeight said, “being afraid that emergency personnel would be called on me. Being afraid to go out in public. ... The most moving thing for me was that he gave me my life back. He gave me a life.”

**By Ben Simon**

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