

KATE MILLER AND SMOKEY

“A breakthrough in emergency medical alert dog training”



“**Help me Smokey... go find mom,**” she exclaimed with urgency in her voice. The smooth coated black lab mix pulled the ripcord of her Alert-Dog System and immediately sprinted the seventy five yards to their apartment. “Good boy Smokey... where is Kate, go find Kate,” said Renee excitedly. Smokey turned on a dime and returned to Kate. Upon his return the two hugged as Kate dug out a small cube of cheese as a reward for a job well done.

The task was completed flawlessly. After more than a year of training for Smokey and three weeks of team training for the trio,

success had been achieved. Smokey would now reliably activate our Alert-Dog System® on verbal command. The next step is to create an association between Kate’s seizure activity and the activation of the newly developed system.

This story really starts in 1992 when Great Plains first began work with assistance dogs and individuals with seizure disorders. Through the years we have worked with two or three individuals each year. With each seizure dog team we have gained invaluable knowledge. In the past decade we have spoken with thousands of individuals who face the challenge of living with seizure [and similar] disorders. With each conversation we listen closely for the common threads as well as for the variances. For nearly a decade we have sought to standardize training to assist those who need a sentry that could provide awareness of emergency medical situations.

Great Plains has been asked to intervene with many different debilitating conditions. Seizure disorders lead the list however requests include post-stroke victims, those with chronic heart disease, the elderly, children, those with diabetes and the list goes on. These dogs, the training methodology and the Alert-Dog System® may be appropriate in any situation where minute to minute monitoring of an individual is required.

Kate Miller is eighteen years old and graduated from high school in the spring of 2002. Along with the everyday challenges that life provides Kate lives with several disabilities. As an eight year old child she was diagnosed as having Multiple Sclerosis. She has also been brain injured due to a bout with Encephalitis and now must cope with a seizure disorder due to that illness. In 1998 she was diagnosed with Sclera derma, a disfiguring condition that also attacks the immune system.

In spite of the difficulties Kate loves to laugh and loves to meet people. To say that Kate is a social butterfly is perhaps the understatement of a lifetime.

When asked how she felt an assistance dog would improve function in daily living Renee, Kate’s mother, wrote the following. “There are many ways a dog would improve the quality of life for Kate, probably the most important being freedom, a chance to be left alone at home or take walks in the neighborhood or park. This would reduce stress also, in Kate’s life. She would have a constant companion to love giving her a constant “best friend”. The dog would open the door for socialization as Kate has never met a stranger, endearing as she is people love her and she cannot get enough social interaction. This would boost her self esteem a lot. Because she trusts

everyone the dog could aid in protection. We have had “close calls” already, my watchful eye has saved her. Finally the dog could carry emergency meds, in case of seizures away from me! The application of Kate Miller was accepted in early 2002. In May Kate and her mother traveled to the Great Plains training center to attend a “compatibility check”.

It was on the first day that Smokey and Kate first met. Smokey had been given to the Great Plains program more than a year previous. Many guesses have been made as to his breed influences. They include lab/ greyhound, lab/whippet, lab/ smooth collie... the world may never know for sure, but we know there is black lab in there. We also know that Smokey is a gentle, caring soul and that he and Kate really hit it off.

The Miller's returned home and placement was set for July. In the interim Great Plains director Mike Goehring set out to develop an alerting system that would give Kate (and others) the freedom of which her mother had written. Simultaneously Great Plains trainer Jim Brokaw put the finishing touches on Smokey's training.

Goehring states enthusiastically, “We set out to develop a medical emergency alert system that was specifically designed for use by a trained dog. In the past we have used existing technologies that have proven to be problematic for one reason or another. Rather than providing a remedy to the problems through training and canine dexterity... we set out to make the technology simple for the dog to use. The Alert-Dog System® has accomplished just that. We are proud as can be to have come up with this concept as we feel it can and will revolutionize emergency medical alert dog training.”

In July of 2002 Great Plains received patent pending status on the system. Over the course of the next months we intend to further develop the unit. Our long term goal is to have the unit available for purchase by the general public. The complete system would include the 2-way alert units, training manual and training video. “We are putting a lot of thought into the development of this system”, Goehring goes on to say, “in the final product we want a system that will work with or without a trained dog. As it is now we have something that will be beneficial in a good many circumstances including care for children, the elderly and those living with disability. At the same time we want to have something that in form and function is liberating for those using the system.”

At the present time we are intentionally vague about the system. There is still development to be done on the system and we do not want to unveil its specific use and function until we've fully completed the development stage. We are confident that this system will be widely used by those who have someone to “look after”.

Kate Miller and her mother Renee have been using the system for going on a month now. We could have used this years ago” says mom. “We have found some things within the system that can be improved upon, but overall we are very pleased with it”, Goehring adds. Goehring further states, “the system is working as it was intended to. Kate has more freedom and mom has less to worry about. That was the plan... and you have to like it when a good plan comes together.”

We want to take a moment to thank Make-a-Wish Foundation of Oklahoma as well as Joe Buono and his wife for providing the funding that brought Kate Miller and Smokey together. The costs of follow-up will be offset through our scholarship funds. Scholarship dollars are obtained through donations from regular contributors to Great Plains Assistance Dogs Foundation, Inc. In the upcoming months we will provide more news on Kate and Smokey as well as on our new Alert Dog Systems® We are hopeful that in the not too distant future we will have these systems available for purchase. Keep your eyes on our website for further information regarding this system.