

Afton-Lakeland teacher has special bond with service dog who helps manage her diabetes

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Gazette photo by Kari VanDerVeen
Molly Kaliher, a special education teacher at Afton-Lakeland Elementary School, relies on her service dog, Dixie, to help her manage her Type 1 Diabetes. When Kaliher's blood sugar levels become low, the one-and-a-half-year-old Dixie alerts Kaliher by jumping up and licking her.

STILLWATER - Molly Kaliher calls the rare form of diabetes she has lived with her entire life an invisible disease.

Invisible, that is, to everyone except her dog Dixie.

The small black dog's acute sense of smell allows her to pick up on the chemical imbalances that define Kaliher's Type 1 Diabetes. Dixie - a Labrador-Chow-Chow mix - not only knows that her owner has diabetes, but is trained to alert her when Kaliher's blood sugar levels are low.

Working around the clock, one-and-a-half-year-old Dixie demonstrates model behavior by remaining extremely calm and well-behaved until Kaliher's blood-sugar levels drop. That's when she jumps up and energetically licks Kaliher to alert her.

"Even when I take her to the dog park, she still worries about me," said Kaliher, a special education teacher at Afton-Lakeland Elementary School. "She'll be off playing, but every so often she comes over the check on me and make sure I'm OK."

Dogs serve individuals with a variety of disabilities, but training dogs to alert people with diabetes is something that has picked up steam in just the last few years.

Michael Goehring, the executive director of the Great Plains Assistance Dog Foundation in Jud, N.D., said while the number is hard to pinpoint, there are probably only 50 to 100 dogs in the country trained to alert people with diabetes. He expects to see the demand for this type of service dog increase in the next five to 10 years.

Kaliher first started on her journey to get a service dog about a year and a half ago. After she contacted the Great Plains Assistance Dog Foundation, she found that she qualified for the new program but it would cost about \$15,000.

"It was a major cost," Kaliher said. "I thought it was going to be some money, but I had no idea it would be that much."

A "Paws for a Cause" District 834-wide fundraiser quickly raised more than \$8,000 for Kaliher. That, combined with a \$2,000 donation by the Lions Club that Kaliher's father belongs to, enabled her to begin making arrangements to get a service dog. Kaliher said she was overwhelmed by the generosity.

"It's humbling," she said. "I really appreciate what everyone did."

When the application - and fundraising - for a service dog was complete, Kaliher headed to North Dakota to spend three weeks working with the dog she would bring home.

The first day she worked with three dogs, but knew the only one she wanted was Dixie.

Although Dixie was half the size of the other Labradors the center had as possible candidates, Kaliher said she instantly knew the dog was "gifted and talented."

Goehring found Dixie at a Humane Society shelter. Although they don't know much about her past, Kaliher and others said they think Dixie is a Labrador and Chow-Chow mix because of her black tongue and small size - her slight frame weighs in at just 50 pounds.

Not every dog can be trained for service - Goehring said he looks for dogs that he thinks will bond well with their owner and that have a calm demeanor. Goehring said he relies

on a "gut feeling" when choosing dogs, and about 70 percent of the time chooses dogs that work with the program.

Once Kaliher and Dixie were paired, the two spent three weeks repeatedly drilling the "Basic Five" commands: sit, stay, come, heel and lay down.

Now the two are rarely apart. Dixie wears a small blue vest that reads "Please Don't Pet Me - I'm Working," and Kaliher said even the smallest students at Afton-Lakeland Elementary School understand that Dixie is a "working dog." And the bond between Kaliher and Dixie is unbreakable. The first time Kaliher left Dixie at home was excruciatingly difficult.

"I sat in the car and sobbed," Kaliher said, acknowledging that the bond between them is what makes Dixie's service work.

While service dogs by law must be admitted into any venue their owner enters, Kaliher said sometimes she gets strange looks and comments from people because her diabetes is not a readily apparent disability like blindness.

"Sometimes I'll go into stores and people will say, 'Why do you have that dog with you?'" Kaliher said. "But there are dogs working for a lot of reasons, and it's important to remember that."

Without Dixie, Kaliher would lose a certain amount of independence in her life, she said. "I can't imagine not having her."

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