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Dog helps keep diabetic teen alive and well

health: Diabetic teen's dog helps keep his sugar levels on track

MIKE ARCHBOLD; The News Tribune

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Max has a nose for health. His job: Keep 14-year-old Liam Kelly alive and well.

The Gig Harbor-area teen lives with the sugar highs and lows of Type 1 diabetes and the real possibility he might slip into a diabetic coma while asleep.

That's why Max, a 55-pound black Labrador, is nearly always with him.

"He's my continuous glucose monitor but with four legs and a tail," Kelly quipped recently.

Max has a nose for Kelly's blood-sugar levels, thanks to training from Ron Pace and Jarod Pace of Canyon Crest K9 Training Center in the Summit/Waller Road area.

Using actions and rewards, the Paces taught Max to alert Kelly when his blood-sugar levels were too high (above 180 milligrams per deciliter) or too low (80 milligram per deciliter.)

Knowing his blood-sugar level and keeping it close to normal helps Kelly prevent long-term physical complications that come with Type 1 diabetes, a disease that can't be reversed.

"Ron and Max have literally saved Liam's life and allowed him to feel he can participate in sports or anything he wants," said Kelly's mother, Lisa. "After football camp, Max was alerting four or five times a day.

"Liam thought he was fine, but the dog knew otherwise."

BOY IS A HEAVY SLEEPER

Lisa Kelly, who is a physical therapist, and her husband, Michael, have learned a lot about diabetes since their son was diagnosed with the disease in January 2008.

But she knew nothing about diabetes service dogs until she attended a conference on children with diabetes and met a woman with a dog who responded to her blood-sugar levels. She was convinced such a dog would give her son the healthiest life possible.

One reason she wanted the dog was that her son is an extremely heavy sleeper and sleep can be deadly if his glucose level drops. Max helps, but she and her husband still get up at midnight, 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. to check on him.

"We are still getting up," she said.

Training to be on alert to diabetic emergencies is a new application for service dogs, Lisa Kelly said, noting that few trainers teach those skills and fewer than 100 such dogs are in use in the country.

"It's really a matter of personal choice right now," she said. "It's really new and hard to prove in a scientific way that the dog is doing what you say."

For her, she said, the proof is her son's health.

A spokeswoman with the Seattle chapter of the American Diabetes Foundation said the group has no formal opinion about diabetic alert dogs. But the word from those who have them is they are very successful, said Alyssa Olsen.

‘THE DOG WAS FANTASTIC’

Finding the right dog wasn't easy for Lisa Kelly.

She turned to Ron Pace, 52, who has been a dog trainer for more than 30 years. He started the Tacoma Police K-9 Training program and teaches both dog owners and their animals how to behave.

Max is his first diabetic service dog, Pace said.

“I've done about every type of training, but this was a new one for me,” Ron Pace said. “It was new challenge after all these years.”

He found Max last February on Craigslist in Bothell and brought Liam Kelly along to inspect the dog. To check Max's sense of smell, Kelly gave himself extra insulin to lower his glucose level.

When Kelly entered the house Max, though untrained to detect diabetic problems, was all over him.

“The dog was fantastic,” Pace said. “He knew something was different.”

All dogs have good noses, though some are better than others, he noted.

“You can teach a dog the difference between Pepsi and Coca-Cola,” Pace said. “We smell the soup. He smells all the ingredients.”

TRAINERS DONATED THEIR TIME

To train Max, Pace used clothing Liam Kelly wore when experiencing different glucose levels. (To maintain the scent, the articles were frozen. Lisa Kelly said she keeps a drawer full of pieces of her son's clothing marked with glucose levels in her freezer.)

Pace said it took less than 30 days before Max was able to alert Liam to possible problems.

On March 5, Max came to the Kelly household for good. He and Liam haven't been apart much since. When they are apart, Max gets anxious, Lisa Kelly said.

Kelly said the Paces have been life-savers. They donated their expertise and time in training Max, whose owner provided him without charge.

“They have helped us and given up their free time,” she said of the Paces. “They've traveled with us, taught us things. It's been great.”

Jarod Pace alone spent five days and nights at the Kelly house, she said.

Max's and Liam's training continues. Once a month they join a group class at the Paces' training center.

Last Wednesday, Liam Kelly started his freshman year at Gig Harbor High School. Max hasn't gone to school with him, but he will in a couple of weeks after Liam figures out his new school. He and Max plan to graduate together.

Max has his own bed in Liam's room and likes to curl up in the teen's lap while watching TV.

Thanks to Max, Liam can play football. His goal is to play college football like his older brother, Sean, now an assistant football coach at Gig Harbor High.

The younger Kelly said his friends think Max is “really cool.” But they have had to learn not to touch him.

“You are supposed to ignore him,” Kelly said. “He’s working.”

To Liam, he’s more than just a helper.

“He’s my best friend,” he said.

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To be alert to changes in glucose levels, a service dog first must learn the warning scents. A high level turns a person’s breath and body odor sweet and fruity. A low level provokes a rusty, pale scent that is more acidic.

People can’t detect the difference, but a trained service dog like Max can.

Once he catches the scent, the black Labrador makes sure his owner, Liam Kelly, knows there might be a problem. He jumps on the teen and licks him, gently mouths his wrist, bites his pants or even knocks over nearby objects to sure he’s got his attention.

Kelly provides the reward: A high reading gets Max his favorite toy, a stuffed bear; a low reading gets him a piece of cheese, usually string.

With the command, “Get the kit,” Max finds and fetches the glucose meter Kelly uses to test his sugar level. That trick earns Max a squeaky blue ball.

Mike Archbold, The News Tribune

Diabetes data

Type 1: A rare form of the disease where the body’s pancreas no longer makes insulin to control blood sugar level. It is caused by an autoimmune disorder. There is no cure, but it is controllable. Ten percent of diabetics, or about 700,000 people nationwide, have Type 1 diabetes.

Type 2: The most common type of diabetes, often caused by being overweight and advanced age. It can be prevented with proper diet and exercise.

By the numbers*

343,000: Number of adults in Washington state in 2007 with diabetes.

132,000: Number of adults in Washington state in 1994 with diabetes.

7.9 to 9.1: Percentage of adults in Pierce County in 2005 with diabetes. Diabetes information

American Diabetes Association: www.diabetes.org/

Washington State Diabetes Network: diabetes.doh.wa.gov/

Diabetic alert service dogs

Canyon Crest K9 Training Center, 4515 Vickery Ave. E.: 253-926-9200 or www.dogabetics.com.

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