

# JDRF Northwest Chapter

*Mission: To find a cure for diabetes and its complications through the support of research.*

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## Dogabetics: A Furry, Four-legged Glucose Monitor

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A few weeks after Gig Harbor teen Liam Kelly was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes in January 2008, his mother Lisa Kelly attended a conference and met a woman with a diabetic alert dog. She believed such a dog could help give her son a more healthy, normal life while keeping tighter glucose control around the clock.

"Liam is an extremely heavy sleeper—and the threat of nighttime lows is very real and very deadly," she says. "And the psychological impact of dealing with diabetes, especially for a teenager, can be isolating. I felt that the bond and confidence a diabetic alert dog could provide would be beneficial."

Through a family connection, she met Ron Pace, who owns Canyon Crest K-9 Training Center in Tacoma. Pace, who has trained police and drug-sniffing dogs for 30 years, had never worked with a diabetic service dog, but was game to try. "I've done almost every type of training," he says, "but this was a new challenge after all these years."

### Learn More

- **Online:** [www.dogabetics.com](http://www.dogabetics.com)
- **Phone:** call Ron Pace at 253-926-9200
- **E-mail:** [ronpace@canyoncrestk9.com](mailto:ronpace@canyoncrestk9.com)



Pace found Max, a black lab, on Craigslist last February and felt he'd be a good match for Liam. Pace and his son Jarod donated their time to train the dog as a favor to the Kellys', assuming Max would be their first and last diabetic service dog. But they quickly saw the great need and potential for training type 1 diabetic

alert dogs, and recently started a new branch of their business called Dogabetics (dogabetics.com).

### **The Nose Knows**

How does one teach an animal to detect the life-threatening differences in glucose levels? Dogs have very sensitive noses, some breeds more than others. "You can teach a dog to smell the difference between Pepsi and Coke," says Pace. "When you're teaching a dog to use its nose, it just depends on what you want it to find."



During the first meeting between client and canine, Liam wore clothing he had on while experiencing different glucose levels. "These dogs know there's something different about the person as soon as they meet," says Pace. "The bonding process is really incredible from day one." Pace continued to expose Max to different glucose levels, teaching him to detect specific scents on Liam's breath – sweet and fruity during a high, or metallic and acidic during a low.

Using a system of actions and rewards, the Paces trained Max to alert Liam when his blood-sugar levels were above 180 milligrams or below 80 milligrams. In less than 30 days, the dog was alerting Liam. When he catches a scent, Max demands Liam's attention by licking him, laying on him, or jumping up to make sure his owner knows there may be a problem. Max will even find and fetch Liam's glucose meter with a specific command.

Liam appreciates the special bond he has with Max. "He's always happy to be with me, even if I made him work all night long with low blood sugars. He really is my best friend."

### **Top Dogs**

Pace works with the client first, then finds a dog to match the person's needs and lifestyle. He favors golden retrievers and labs 6-18 months old, who are good with people, adaptable to new situations, sure-footed in public areas (streets, airplanes, buses, schools, restaurants), and have a very keen sense of smell.

Pace sends the dog home with his new owner on the very first day. He estimates that the initial training period is 100 hours or more, with follow-up sessions on obedience, scent work, and public access issues.. "I believe in 30 days we can have the team moving along pretty well on their own." It's not a foolproof system. "There are times when the dogs don't alert," says Pace, "but not very often."

Since Max came to live with the Kellys' in March, the dog has alerted Liam several times during school

and football practice when the boy didn't think anything was wrong. For his life-saving work, Max is rewarded with praise, stuffed toys, or treats like string cheese. And, of course, the devotion of the entire Kelly family.

### **A Sense of Freedom and Control**

"Max has literally saved Liam's life and allowed him to feel he can participate in sports or anything he wants because Max will alert him and give him the extra security if his blood sugars are out of range," says Lisa Kelly, who's now a JDRF Northwest board member. She's been very pleased to see a decline in Liam's A1c level since they got the dog, and credits Max for improving her son's health. It's also helped the family feel proactive in the face of this devastating disease.

"Often it seems like diabetes is happening to the individual, and there's a feeling of loss of control. When the dog training began, we felt that we're doing something positive to take back our lives and some of the uncertainty and hyper-vigilance that good diabetes management requires," she says. "It's also given Liam a partner, a great four-legged CGM, and a chance to help others by educating and modeling the choice to use a diabetic alert dog."

### **The Right Human for the Dog**

Having a diabetic service dog is a serious commitment and not right for everyone. Pace says that people should know that having this specially-trained dog is another resource, not a replacement for good diabetes management. He says the best candidates are people (usually age 9 and up) who are very serious about diabetes care and won't tire of having a dog around 24 hours a day.

"Be ready to give up a lot of your free time to work and bond with your dog," adds Liam Kelly. "I have to take care of my dog because he takes care of me—feeding and cleaning up after him, taking him out, going to the vet. There are times I'd rather be lazy, hanging out with my friends and not being so responsible, but you can't be lazy with diabetes. Having Max has given me more confidence that he will keep me safe, but I still need to check, watch my diet, exercise, and go to the doctor. He's an amazing tool, but I have to do my part too."

### **Demand Grows as Word Spreads**

Training to be alert to diabetic emergencies is a new area for service dogs and trainers. Pace and Kelly believe there are only a handful of trainers and about 100 such dogs in the country today. Pace has heard from people around the country who are interested in a diabetic alert dog. He's working with new clients and dogs, as his waiting list grows. "People are coming out of the woodwork," he laughs.



For those interested in exploring this option, Lisa Kelly advises, "Carefully consider that having a diabetic alert dog is a lifestyle choice and a long-term commitment, as dogs usually live at least 10 years. Do your research -- check out different dog trainers and ask for references. Find out how supportive others in your family, school, and work will be of this choice. You have legal rights to use a service dog, but having a supportive environment has been important for us."

One major hurdle for many people is financing. The cost to find and train a dog through Pace's business is \$15,000, while other organizations charge up to \$25,000. Pace and Kelly are trying to set up a non-profit to provide scholarships to defray the cost of diabetic service dogs. Donations of money and dogs who may be good diabetic service dogs are always welcome.

### **Learn More**

Visit [www.dogabetics.com](http://www.dogabetics.com), or contact Ron Pace at 253-926-9200 or [ronpace@canyoncrestk9.com](mailto:ronpace@canyoncrestk9.com).

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