

THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

May 1, 2010

A boy's best friend

Dog trained to detect health risk

John Stucke

The Spokesman-Review

Tags: diabetes health service dog Type I diabetes



Hayden Kamakaala has renamed his service dog Ace. Courtesy of Ron Pace

Like everyone who met Gia, 11-year-old Hayden Kamakaala knew right away the dog from Spokane was special.

A tingle raced through his body when he first saw her. He tugged at his mom's arm, his eyes sparkling: "This is the one!"

As they played, a special connection developed that runs deeper than your typical boy-meets-dog story.

Gia is trained to be Hayden's super-sleuth, using her keen nose to detect when his blood-sugar level rises or falls dangerously.

Hayden, who lives with his family in the Portland suburb of Beaverton, Ore., has Type I diabetes. He has lived with the diagnosis since 2006, when he was a first-grader.

And though Hayden's parents and two brothers adapted and employ precautions, Hayden has had diabetic blood-sugar crashes and other close calls.

His anguished parents, Peri and Fural, hope this newest member of their family can help.

The furry blessing came courtesy of Marlee Griffith, of Spokane, who gave up her beloved 3-year-old Labrador. The dog was named Gialusso, which roughly translates from Italian to "Yellow Luxury."

Griffith is recently divorced and Gia shouldered some of the aftershocks of that life change.

"I'm not home enough and she needed me," Griffith said. "She would sit there on the porch all alone waiting for me. It wasn't fair."

So, "I brought her to work," Griffith said, while on a brief break from her job as a registered cardiology technician at Spokane Cardiology. "Everybody here knows her."

Some days she would keep Gia in her car, hurrying out for quick checks and then taking walks during her lunch hour.

"I finally knew something had to change," Griffith said.

In a letter to friends, including some who were distressed she would give up Gia and one who even threatened to quit talking to her, Griffith wrote: "I painfully acknowledged that changes in my life have not been to Gia's advantage."

So she listed Gia on Craigslist, which she later learned is a no-no. Pet listings are not allowed on the online classifieds site.

But within 10 minutes, before monitors pulled her ad, she received a call from Ron Pace. He trains dogs on several acres outside Tacoma at Canyon Crest K9 Training Center. He wanted to meet Gia. After many conversations and background checks, they met in the dark along Interstate 90 near Seattle.

"I met Gia and she just jumped right into my truck" and lay down, Pace said. "It was like she knew there were important things to do."

"I knew right off the bat that she was a special dog."

Training Gia was a joy, said Pace, who has trained dogs for police work and other services.

"She is so smart and confident ... good with people and other dogs," he said. "And she has that excellent nose." Dogs are said to have a sense of smell 1,000 times greater than humans.

X-rays did reveal that Gia had a congenitally malformed right hip. It's a condition that may trim time from her life and means that she should not be overexerted.

But the setback did not stand in the way of her potential as a companion to a boy in need of help.

Pace uses rewards to train the dogs to recognize the different smell emitted when a person's blood-sugar level rises above 180 milligrams per deciliter, or falls below 80 milligrams per deciliter.

Assured that Gia could help, Griffith sold her for about \$500 – a fraction of what she paid a top Florida breeder.

While the decision was tough, Griffith said she is pleased.

"She'll be pampered and valued, and if or when Hayden suffers a diabetic crisis, she'll have a potentially life-saving job to do," Griffith wrote to friends, assuring them it was going to work.

Pace's relatively new "dogabetics" program is yet to be scientifically proved. But common sense and the families who have so far been helped provide assurances that dogs can make a difference.

When Gia was trained and went home with Hayden, he renamed her Ace for her expertise.

"That was his choice and I guess it fits," said Hayden's mom, Peri Kamakaala.

Ace has already alerted the family to Hayden's blood sugar drops.

She might nuzzle him or wake him. She will lick him, or make grunting noises.

She even has awakened Peri and Fural, alerting them to check on Hayden at night.

"That was neat," Peri said. "Yet even with the dog we can't get complacent. We get up three times a night to check on Hayden. I don't know if that fear will ever be gone, but knowing she's there is a comfort."

Peri stumbled onto the dog-training program while searching online for help for moms of diabetic children.

She was skeptical at first. After visiting Pace's training facility, and checking out his credentials, she grew open to possibilities.

The family will have paid about \$15,000 for Ace and all of her training and care. She will accompany Hayden in sixth grade next fall, be at sporting events and even travel with the family this summer when they fly to Hawaii.

Insurance does not cover the cost.

"Insurance is about paying after something happens, not preventing it in the first place," Peri said.

The family held fundraisers and asked for help from family, co-workers and friends.

They would like to see a nonprofit foundation established that could accept grants and help other eligible families.

Ace graduates in mid-June and Griffith will be at the small ceremony.

"Sure it's bittersweet," she said. "But this has been so incredibly positive."

Peri said the dog gives her some peace of mind about her son's diabetes.

"He's the type of kid who no one is going to tell him he can't do something," she said.

"Having Ace with him helps me, too."

The family is fit and active and dedicated to a lifestyle that helps keep Hayden's diabetes in check.

Hayden counts his own carbohydrates, watches what he eats and cares for himself.

"He is just a remarkable boy," Peri said. "He told me once that his theory is this: 'I'm glad it happened to me, Mom. A lot of kids wouldn't be able to do this.' "

Not many dogs, either.

Get more news and information at [Spokesman.com](http://www.spokesman.com)

