

# Life

## UNLEASHED

MAGAZINE

 Southeastern  
GUIDE DOGS

SUMMER 2021



**Caring for Canines  
at Guide Dog U**

**One Marine's Story**

**Never Alone with CJ**

**Dear Superhero**

**GARY &  
TAHOE STRIVE  
TO THRIVE**



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## from our CEO



Dear Friends,  
Have I ever mentioned how much I love my job? Where else can one witness the jaw dropping transformations that take place when extraordinary dogs and inspirational people come together?

Here on our campus, I'm inspired by the people with vision loss and veterans who train with their new dogs, and by the volunteers and staff who work with passion and positivity.

Here in this magazine, I'm moved by young McKenzie Hanlon's fight for her life; by Gary Erneus' resilience after losing his vision in a tragic instant; and by Liam Altamira's perseverance under pressure as he pushes past his combat injury and PTSD. I'm moved when I see how their dogs CJ, Tahoe, and Walker transform their lives.

These transformations take place because of you our wonderful supporters and volunteers. Your ongoing generosity brings our mission to life. Your kindness makes miracles happen. Your friendship makes all the difference. Thank you so much.

Warm regards,

*Titus Herman*

Titus Herman  
Chief Executive Officer





## from our chairman of the board

Dear Friend,

At the hospital where I serve as CEO, the high quality of patient care is always a top priority. Here at Southeastern Guide Dogs, the high quality of canine care is likewise a top priority. Our dogs are safe, healthy and fit. I've seen firsthand how canine care extends beyond those external factors, too. Are our dogs happy? Engaged? Mentally stimulated? Loved? The answer to all of these is—yes!

At Canine University, our dogs' tails are constantly moving. They share their eagerness and affection with enthusiasm. They love to work and learn—and to relax and nap as well! Our canine care technicians and volunteers surround them with positive energy and boundless love.

Because of you—our donors and volunteers—our dogs receive the best of care. Thank you for making it all possible.

With gratitude,

Bob Meade  
Board Chair, Southeastern Guide Dogs  
Chief Executive Officer, Doctors Hospital of Sarasota

# Life UNLEASHED MAGAZINE

A publication of  
Southeastern Guide Dogs

**Southeastern Guide Dogs** transforms lives by creating and nurturing extraordinary partnerships between people and dogs. With over 1,200 dogs under our auspices, we train dogs of the highest pedigree for people with vision loss, veterans with disabilities, and children with significant challenges. Pursuing our mission since 1982, **we provide our premier dogs and lifetime services at no cost.**

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# The Smooth Crew

*His Glock 45 service weapon could do the job, he knew. Stop the pain. End the darkness. "I'm going to buy a bottle of whiskey and check out," thought Gary Erneus, his eyes on the weapon. But something caught his attention, and Gary focused on the TV announcer. David Paterson had just been appointed the first legally blind governor of a U.S. state and the first Black governor of New York. Wait. What? A blind man was chosen for this position of responsibility and visibility? A blind man?*

## **A Born Leader**

As the middle child of five, Gary's mother saw the strength within him. From a young age, she ignited his passion for learning, working hard, and doing right. "She taught me how to be a leader in life; to take the lead when there's nobody to lead," he says. "She would not make a decision without saying, 'What would Gary say?' or 'You have to wait for Gary's opinion.'"

He pursued an education. He nourished creativity through visual arts and painting. He learned graphic design, researched forensics, and began a law enforcement career as a corrections officer. His mom leaned on



*Gary Erneus  
and Guide Dog  
Tahoe*





*"When I lost my vision, my sense of artistry was gone. I fell in the pit of darkness. I could not think. I could not speak. I could not feel. How am I going to create?"*

him, and his own young children looked up to him as a hero. He dreamed big; he was all about the business of learning and succeeding.

### **Losing His Way**

**O**n August 28, 2008, around 3:45 p.m., Gary performed his usual security check at the prison where he worked. As he turned a corner, an inmate threw hot liquid into his face and eyes. Gary dried off and kept working. When he woke the following day, he stumbled out of bed, barely able to see. Next stop, the emergency room, where a doctor diagnosed corneal burns. "What is that?" Gary asked. The doctor was blunt. "Well, to be honest, you're going to go blind," he said. Gary started

driving home, but the doctor continued to review his test results. His cell phone rang, and the doctor said, "If you are driving a car, you need to stop now. Pull over and get someone to drive you home!"

It was the last time Gary ever sat behind the wheel and the first pivotal moment of downward despair that seeped into every area of his life.

"After I had my accident, I carried a load of resentment towards anyone who was breathing," Gary recalls. "I felt like I was doing the right thing. I went to school, graduated college, and then went to the academy, so I was doing things to better my life. Now here I am working, and an individual decided to throw hot liquid and change my life for the worse. I was walking around feeling like anyone who talked to me was a little bit derogatory. I would feel angry because I was carrying that resentment towards everyone, thinking that everybody was going to hurt me.

It was like a protective mechanism I developed after my accident.

"When I lost my vision, my sense of artistry was gone," he continues. "I fell in the pit of darkness. I could not think. I could not speak. I could not feel because I was not born visually impaired. How am I going to create? I had to first navigate the sea of darkness that came with blindness. I had to live with the fact that I don't know what it means to live as a blind person. My thinking was dark; it was like a chisel chipping away at my artistry. Every day I woke up thinking, what am I doing here? I love writing as well—I could not think to write; I could not think to paint; I could not think about creation itself. I was in the pit of darkness."

And then—despite his disability—Governor David Paterson was chosen for that position of influence and authority. For the first time in three years, Gary felt a flicker of hope.

### **Turning and Learning**

**F**rom that moment on, I said, "Why would they choose him?" Gary muses. "Because of his strength, not because of his weakness. He was chosen because of his talent as a person. And I realized at that moment, instead of me thinking of how dark life was, I asked myself one simple question, 'What is it that I do best?' I love learning. I love books. Okay, so if I can learn, my life is not over."

Gary woke up the next day, sold his weapons, and went to the Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired of Broward County where he received training and independent living skills.

"From that moment on, I have not stopped going to school," he says. "I learned how to live as a blind person. By knowing how to live this way, blindness is no longer a hindrance. Because now I was coming from a place where blind people live like everybody else and can become anything they want. Therefore, who am I to limit myself? Who am I to feel angry? Who am I to go into the pit of darkness? Why don't I just learn how blind and visually impaired people shine?" ▶

## **PUPPY REWIND**



### **Tahoe: Smooth from the Start**

With 22 puppies under their puppy-raising belts, volunteer raisers David and Donna Wright know how to give our pups a strong foundation. When they met Tahoe at just nine weeks, they were instantly smitten. "She was comfortable and easy from day one," David recalls. "Laid back and relaxed but very, very smart."

From their home in Murphy, Texas, they nicknamed Tahoe "Tiny Texan" and remember her as a total joy, an eager beaver who was always ready to put on her coat and head out the door. She has the DNA of a worker, according to Donna, and could be "calm, cool, and collected" whether playing with children of all ages and temperaments or traveling for the first time on an airplane. She was just that smooth.

The Wrights were sure that Tahoe was destined for greatness, that she would someday become someone's extra-special dog. And now, she has, and her special someone is Gary Ernneus, Tahoe's forever-friend. It's fitting that Gary thinks of this dog as the mythical winged horse, Pegasus, because she flies him out of darkness and into the light of freedom and confidence.

**Brian and Margaret Swigert sponsored Tahoe and named her after the shore of Lake Tahoe, where they were married and began their lives together 20 years ago. The name represents the new beginning that they wish for Tahoe and Gary.**





*"When they brought Tahoe into the room, it felt like I knew her. We clicked the first time we met, and that has not changed. The energy is still the same."*

Gary learned to navigate with a cane. He learned Braille. He earned a bachelor's in criminology and then a master's in criminal justice administration. He stopped feeling sorry for himself and started his own business. He focused on raising and mentoring two smart, polite boys.

And meanwhile, his mom continued to see his potential and share her opinions. Gary recalls, "She always used to say, 'That cane is fine, but you need a guide dog!' I was like, 'Mom, you can't just go anywhere and get a guide dog.'" Finally, he was ready to learn more. Gary heeded her advice and applied to Southeastern Guide Dogs. Unexpectedly, Gary's mom passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on the way to her funeral, Gary received the call that he'd been accepted to Guide Dog Class 297.

### **Flying with the Smooth Crew**

**G**ary arrived at our campus in January 2021, when he met his perfect match: a sweet, intelligent, businesslike black Lab named Tahoe.

"The very first time when they brought her into the room, it felt like I knew her," says Gary. "The connection was instant, right there. We clicked the first time we met, and that has not changed.

The energy is still the same."

From the moment they began walking together, their classmates nicknamed Gary and Tahoe the "Smooth Crew" because of their effortless connection. "It was like love at first sight," Gary explains. "We were like the smooth crew from the jump; we're smooth; we're walking, and you don't know we're walking; we're here, and you don't know we're here. When we started, we were all about our business. That was a magical moment. To me, it's like rainbows,



**Dogs of Destiny**  
To hear more about guide dog Tahoe, Gary Ernneus, and puppy raisers Donna and David Wright, watch *Dogs of Destiny, Season 1, Episode 3: "Freedom Walk"* at [Guidedogs.org/DogsOfDestiny](https://Guidedogs.org/DogsOfDestiny).

unicorns, fairies; all those mythical characters came to life. And that's why I call her Pegasus. She's Tahoe, but she's Pegasus to me, a mythical creature from out of this world. Pegasus is a horse with wings that can fly. And I look at Tahoe like that. She has her wings, flying me across the world. It is amazing."

With Tahoe by his side and the Smooth Crew in full motion, Gary now walks through life with even greater confidence. "A guide dog is a companion, a dog that will save your life," he says. Gary's eyesight may be blurred, but his vision is perfectly clear. "Becoming visually impaired changed my life for the worse. But receiving a guide dog is changing my life for the better. When you think that life is over, life has just begun." ●

### **KEEPING THE VISION ALIVE**



"Art means life to me," says Gary. He was seven when he watched an old man painting. "My heart was racing, and from that moment on, my passion for art was like a magnet. It just pulled me in." After losing his sight, Gary kept creating. "I paint things I cannot see; just using my hand, I take the brush and go in one swoop. I bring the art to life, regardless of its flaws, regardless of its imperfection. Nothing in this world is perfect—nor is art. I paint whatever comes to me, regardless of outcomes, regardless of what people think. The beauty of art is in the eye of the beholder."

**THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING GUIDE DOGS LIKE TAHOE. YOU GIVE WINGS TO PEOPLE LIKE GARY!**



“I don’t know if she’ll live through the night, but we’re going to try our hardest.”

**Mark Harrigan, M.D.,** neurological surgeon and professor, the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine, Department of Neurosurgery, about McKenzie after her first brain surgery



# The Fight of her Life

McKenzie Hanlon left the womb fighting for her life. Born 12 weeks early at just 2 pounds, 2 ounces, she fought for health and became one of the smallest babies ever released from the hospital, at 3 pounds, 14 ounces. That fighting spirit would serve her well in the coming years.

As she grew, she danced, mostly ballet, but also tap and hip hop. Middle school was punctuated by dance rehearsals and crew practice. Life was normal . . . school, homework, friends, practice, and family time in their Birmingham, Alabama home.

The headaches began at 14. *Normal*, said the pediatrician, who wrote a migraine prescription. For three years, the headaches hounded, but one particular night when McKenzie was 17, the pain became unbearable. “Can you sleep with me? I’m scared,” she whispered to her mom, Misti Garrison.

The next day, the pediatrician nearly sent them home with more medications. But something pushed Misti—some see it as mother’s intuition, but Misti sees it as a nudge of the heavenly kind—and she insisted on a scan for her daughter. The doctor scheduled an MRI for the next day.

## THE TRAUMA BEGINS

Immediately after the MRI, what came next seared dark memories into McKenzie’s aching brain. Tension. Concerned stares from technicians. Urgency. The pediatrician sobbing, a police officer standing behind her ready to speed them along. Then came the ambulance ride; the children’s hospital turning them away because her case was “too complex;” the four neurosurgeons waiting at the next hospital; and the first of what would become six brain surgeries. Meanwhile, McKenzie fought against the terror of the unknown.



**McKenzie Hanlon & Guide Dog CJ**

Photos of McKenzie and CJ by Chris Lake



## PUPPY REWIND



### CJ: Antics and Affection

From the beginning, puppy CJ was a “loving, alert, and engaging pup with a comical character,” according to puppy raiser Anthony Loffler. She loved the water, especially jumping into the pool, and her antics and affection created many fun memories for her first human family.

Anthony remembers CJ as an easygoing and attentive girl who caught on to her training cues quickly. She was an excellent student when on leash, determined to learn and achieve what her puppy raiser wanted. CJ was so clever! She seemed to love making him happy and was never one to hold back at playtime. As a younger pup, CJ had a hard time “putting on the brakes” when she started running and even made what Anthony calls “leaps of faith” over his pet golden retriever. CJ’s antics resulted in unexpected somersaults for both dogs and even more laughter. It’s no wonder that CJ grew up to be a delightful and devoted companion and guide for McKenzie!

Catalina Marketing Charitable Foundation sponsored **CJ** and named her after a Southeastern Guide Dogs Superheroes on Parade statue, Captain, making her “Captain Jr.” or CJ. A captain’s responsibility is to safely guide his vessel, just as CJ safely guides McKenzie.

Her mom remembers dire words spoken by top neurosurgeons. “McKenzie has the largest aneurysm I’ve ever seen in my life,” one said. The size of a small orange, operating on it saved her life, but the strokes that followed were devastating. Ultimately, the strokes caused paralysis to her right side, difficulty speaking, and a loss of about 75% of her vision.

### FEAR, FAITH, AND FIGHT

“We need you to fight harder than you’ve ever fought before,” her mom whispered before that first surgery.

“I still—to this day—remember that moment,” says McKenzie. “I was frightened, yes, but I knew the doctors had it covered, and I had faith that everything was going to be okay.”

Next came three weeks of unremembered blackout darkness followed by months and then years of slow, painstaking recovery, doctors’ appointments, more surgeries, and physical therapy.

McKenzie finished high school from a wheelchair. She learned to walk again, unsteadily. She graduated from wheelchair to white cane and grew increasingly frustrated at the cane’s limitations and her many trips and falls. She applied for a guide dog from a school “somewhere in Florida,” meanwhile, the family moved to Lakewood Ranch, Florida, unaware that the Southeastern Guide Dogs Palmetto campus was only 20 minutes away from their new home. To this faith-filled family, the coincidence was just another God-orchestrated step in McKenzie’s journey.

### THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

That journey required patience. After she applied for a dog, it took nearly two years for instructors to match McKenzie with her guide. The instructors knew that she needed one very special dog whose pace matched hers and—considering her balance issues—had the gentlest of temperaments. Because she lived so close to campus, instructors would visit her home with potential guide dogs for “test drives,” and each time, McKenzie got her hopes up.

When a sweet yellow Lab named CJ came to visit, McKenzie felt the connection. “I instantly knew—that’s my dog!” she shares. “We have a picture of the first time she walked up to me. You could see the dog’s smile! We knew right away, and I hoped that she was the one.”

When she got the phone call inviting her to attend Guide Dog Class 294 on September 27, 2020, McKenzie



McKenzie and CJ’s first meeting!



was ecstatic. “I made a countdown calendar to come to class, and for the calendar image, I chose the smiling picture of CJ.”

### MATCH DAY

Incoming students are never told their dogs’ names until just before Match Day, the first Monday of class. Instructors spend hours poring over the files of class-ready dogs and incoming students, evaluating humans’ and dogs’ paces, temperaments, lifestyles, personalities, and the instructors’ own gut instincts born from years of experience and hundreds (thousands?) of dogs. It’s an art and a science, matching just the right dog with just the right person, and decisions can change with new observations.

McKenzie was desperate to know—who was her dog?

On Match Day, she held her breath while a trainer announced the dogs. McKenzie recognized some names from dogs she’d met before. ▶

“We need you to fight harder than you’ve ever fought before,” her mom whispered before that first surgery.



With CJ by her side, McKenzie will arrive at college equipped with a battle buddy to help continue her fight for a better life.



Ralph. No, Ralph matched with a young classmate named Taylor. Lady. No, Lady went to her new friend, Allie. Nanc. Sammy. Luke. Lee. No. No. No. No.

"McKenzie, your dog's name is CJ," said the trainer. "I burst out crying!" says McKenzie. "We were very happy with the decision," echoes her mom. For three weeks, the new teams trained together until graduation day, October 16, 2020, when McKenzie and CJ went home to begin the next stage of their journey together.

### NEVER ALONE

"CJ is life-changing," McKenzie gushes. "She guides me; she's truly impacted me so much. I can't describe it! When I feel sad and just not myself, CJ picks up on it and licks me to death—she comforts me. This dog is truly remarkable."

"She's an all-around perfect dog," Misti says. "She gives McKenzie confidence and unconditional love—that dog just loves her to death!" CJ guides McKenzie like a pro, and she's available for around-the-clock cuddles, snuggles, and her habit of inching herself as close as possible to her very best friend.

As McKenzie leaves home for college this fall (she'll stick with the "Southeastern" theme and attend Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida), she won't have to worry about tripping, falling, and crashing into obstacles as she did with a cane. "CJ especially knows what's coming and what to maneuver me around," she says. With CJ by her side, McKenzie will arrive at college equipped with a battle buddy to help continue her fight for a better life. She'll also arrive with a secret-keeper, conversation-starter, and friend-maker: her extraordinary, lovable, life-changing guide dog. ●

**YOUR DONATION GIVES THE TIMELY GIFT OF HOPE TO PEOPLE LIKE MCKENZIE. THANK YOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS!**





# WORKING IT OUT WITH WALKER

**Once a Marine, Always a Marine.** Whether active duty, discharged, or retired, the U.S. Marine Corps stamps its values into the core of every Marine: courage, honor, commitment, and *semper fi*—always faithful. Having each other’s back means everything.

So, when Liam Altamira, a Marine field radio operator, experienced a high-impact injury in a northern Iraqi desert, unable to walk for months, he felt helpless.

LIAM ALTAMIRA AND SERVICE DOG WALKER





## PUPPY REWIND



### Sympathetic, Empathetic Walker

“Walker was always very attuned to the emotions of people,” recalls his puppy raiser, Heather D’Agostino. When someone was feeling down, he was sympathetic and caring. When Heather’s daughter, who has Down syndrome, was feeling anxious, Walker would come to her and lay his head on her lap or sit by her while she was in the bath. He could sense when she needed a companion.

As a puppy in their home, Walker was active and lively. His favorite game was “keep away,” mischievously played with someone’s sock or stuffed toy. He loved all other dogs and the people he met. The D’Agostino family felt sure that Walker would make an ideal guide or service dog because of his good natured, affectionate personality and his exceptional empathy. “We are so proud of Walker and grateful for the opportunity to be involved in the beginning of his career,” Heather shares. “We hope Walker is a blessing to his veteran.”

**Walker** was sponsored and named by the Bradenton puppy raisers group. Because guide and service dogs walk with their handlers through life, naming this superhero Walker felt perfect to these caring volunteers.

“Watching everyone around me have to pick up slack because I couldn’t do my job—that was super depressing,” he says.

Liam grew up in the Philippines and then Tampa, the grandson of a World War II U.S. Army soldier. “I knew from a young age I wanted to join the military,” he says. “I signed up my junior year of high school and left for boot camp three days after graduation.”

Between 2011 and 2016, Liam deployed to 26 countries with his Marine expeditionary unit (MEU). This quick reaction force was the first to respond to the ISIS atrocities in northern Iraq. “I was the guy with the huge antenna target the whole time we were on the ground,” he says. “I was good at what I was doing. I was responsible for making sure the communication between my team and back on base was on point. When things hit the fan, I would call for backup; call for medics. It was a huge responsibility, not only to my Marines but also to their families—it solidified their safety.”

After the injury, Liam landed in an Army medic base in Kuwait. “They didn’t have the right equipment to know what was wrong,” he says, “but I couldn’t walk for a few months, and they didn’t want to fly me back to the states. I was in that weird gray area, getting shot up with morphine to endure the pain. I spent the rest of my time in the Marine Corps being scared to live out my life.”

### 23 and Out

Liam was diagnosed with degenerative disc disease and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and received a medical discharge in 2016. He experienced chronic back pain and PTSD’s debilitating depression, anxiety, isolation, and downright misery. Doctors prescribed a cocktail of painkillers and other medications. “Being young and having back issues, I felt like I was 100 years old,” he says. He was only 23.

Eventually, Liam turned to the gym to improve his range of motion. He needed an education—a career “plan B” after the Marines—and enrolled at the University of South Florida. Focusing was hard. “My mind would go down a rabbit hole,” he recalls. And the unrelenting back pain limited his activities. “I would bring about 30 pencils to class because I’m always dropping them, and I didn’t want to ask people to pick them up for me.”

### The Best Medicine

After a year as an overmedicated “zombie,” Liam’s doctor suggested a service dog. Liam researched and found the school he wanted right near his Tampa home: Southeastern Guide Dogs. Meanwhile, after horrendous side effects from medication, Liam had stopped taking meds cold turkey and “fell into the rabbit hole” again. He lost focus. His grades suffered. His hopes fell. And then, in March 2019, he was accepted to train with Service Dog Class 276, where he met a sensitive, sturdy, big-boy of a dog named Walker.

“Walker was the biggest dog in our class,” Liam recalls, smiling. “Here comes this 75-pound, hefty black Lab with his tail wagging. He’s such a gentle giant. He’s super mellow; he just wants to be there, be your friend; he just wants to keep you company.”

“I always felt alone,” he continues. “I couldn’t really reach out to anybody or talk to anybody who would understand what I was going through. Walker helped fill that void. Having someone that

**“I ALWAYS FELT ALONE, I COULDN’T REACH OUT TO ANYBODY. WALKER HELPED FILL THAT VOID.”**



I could look after—and he could look after me—I didn’t feel alone anymore. I haven’t even thought about going back to any PTSD meds since I’ve had Walker.”

### Walker Works Out

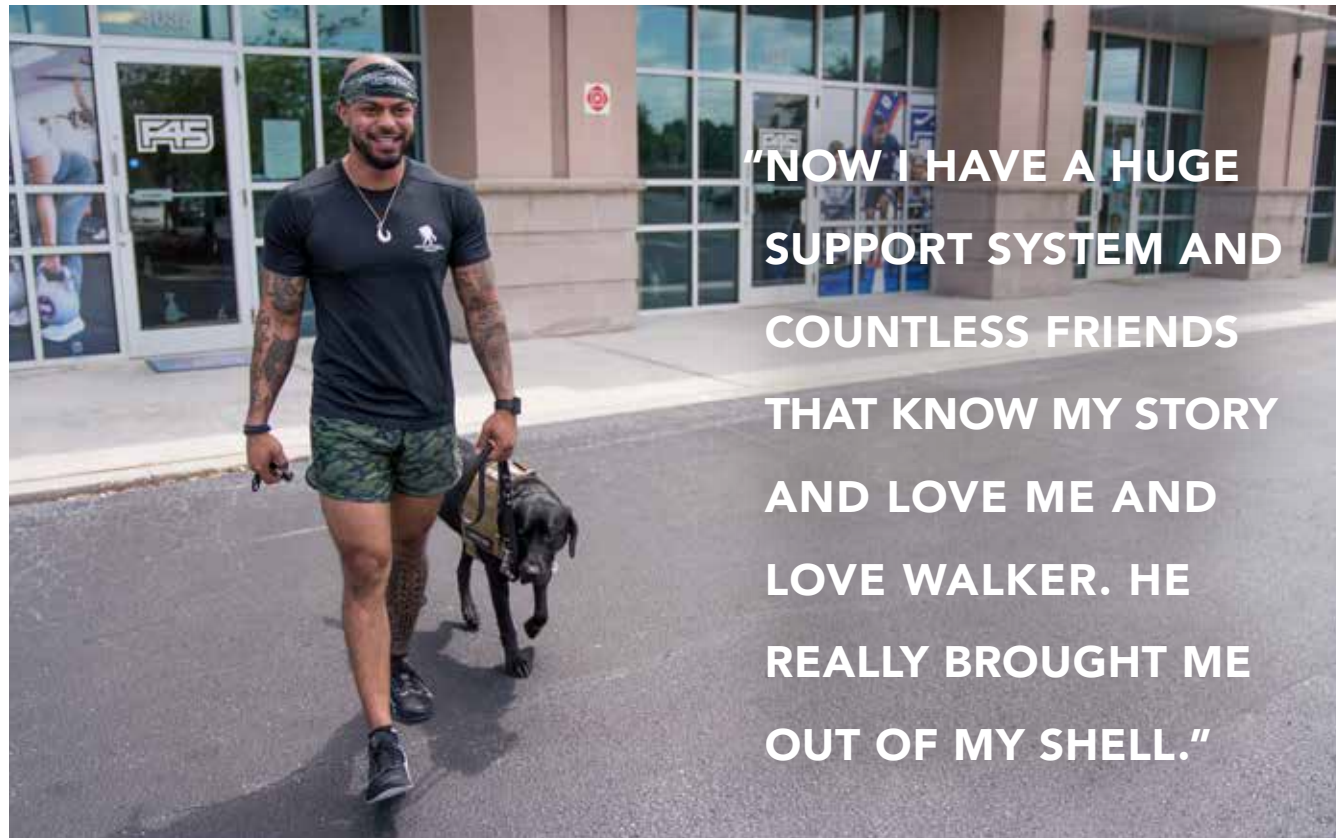
Walker was specially trained to retrieve objects, which came in handy in the classroom. At first, Liam used a verbal cue to ask his dog to retrieve, but now they understand each other so well that Walker retrieves dropped items without a word. Another skill Walker offers is the cover cue, where he lays on Liam’s feet, comforting Liam with his physical presence and letting him know if someone approaches.

As their bond grew stronger, Liam felt the changes: Walker was working out perfectly. He helped him regain mental clarity, and Liam graduated with a bachelor’s degree in health sciences. Walker helped him come out of isolation, and Liam began to hang out with friends again. He regained his confidence, and he landed a job as a professional fitness trainer at an elite gym. Someday, Liam would like to become a social worker helping other veterans living with PTSD, but for now, the

gym keeps his back at its strongest.

At the gym, Walker works out perfectly. “In the studio, I have to keep this persona; I have to be the energy for the class,” Liam explains. “Walker keeps me grounded, and I can still see him from any part of the room. He can see me, and I can see him. And the clients just love him.” ▶





**"NOW I HAVE A HUGE SUPPORT SYSTEM AND COUNTLESS FRIENDS THAT KNOW MY STORY AND LOVE ME AND LOVE WALKER. HE REALLY BROUGHT ME OUT OF MY SHELL."**



"After I got Walker, he forced me to become more sociable; to share my story and not be ashamed of the struggles I'm going through," Liam shares. "He's made me more accepting of my past, which makes it a lot easier to move forward. Now I have a huge support system and countless friends that know my story and love me and love Walker. He really brought me out of my shell."

When it comes to other veterans, Liam still has their back. Years ago, he read about another veteran with PTSD and the service dog that helped him. "He was in the same situation I was in, going from medication to medication and not being able to separate himself from being stuck in his mind," Liam says. "Hopefully, I'll be that guy, and someone else will read about me and how much Walker has helped me. He's just life-changing. I cannot thank the Southeastern Guide Dogs community enough." *Semper fi.* ●



**YOUR GIFT SHOWS VETERANS LIKE LIAM THAT YOU'VE GOT HIS BACK WITH LIFE-CHANGING DOGS LIKE WALKER.**



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# Dear Superhero

## A LETTER TO MY FUTURE GUIDE DOG

Dear Superhero,

I do not yet know your name, but I know you. I do not yet know your breed or color, but I know you. I have dreamed of you and all the things we will do together.

I know you have been working hard to be the best superhero you can be for me. I have no doubt that we will be a perfect Superhero Duo. We are going to change the world, you and I. We are going to take on the challenges that come our way with grace and style.

While you do not know much about me, the first thing you must learn is . . . I am no quitter. Just like you—when it gets rough in training, we won't give up on any challenge! More importantly, we will never give up on each other.

I promise to love you every day. I promise to comfort you and cherish you like no other. I promise to make sure you are healthy and happy. I promise to attend to your needs as you attend to mine. I promise to create play time and snuggle time that makes you feel loved and appreciated.

I know there are lots of rules that we have to learn together still, and we will spend much time working but know this: you are my lifeline. You are my eyes and I will trust you completely. I will never take us into areas that are not safe for us and will follow your lead.

I cannot wait to meet you, Superhero. I cannot wait to touch your nose and get kisses. I cannot wait to wrap my arms around your neck and let you know how special you are to me. I love you already, even though I have not yet met you. See you soon!

Love,

Your future mom

Lynn Puckett

**Dogs  
of  
Destiny**

To hear more about guide dog AJ, Lynn Puckett, and puppy raiser Jim Ebling, watch *Dogs of Destiny, Season 1, Episode 2: "Dear Superhero"* at [Guidedogs.org/DogsOfDestiny](https://Guidedogs.org/DogsOfDestiny).



Lynn Puckett with her guide dog, AJ

Photo by Chris Lake

**A** storyteller who loves people, Lynn Puckett has always wanted others to be successful, never realizing that one day she'd have to inspire herself. But after losing vision in her left eye due to a failed surgery, she woke up two years ago to find the vision in her right eye was gone, too. After isolating at home and depending on her husband and teenage daughter, Lynn decided to embrace life and seek a better version of herself. Her daughter encouraged her to apply for a guide dog, and Lynn was accepted into Class 298, held in February, 2021.

Before she arrived, she penned this letter to her future guide dog. Here at Southeastern Guide Dogs, she found her soulmate in a friendly, inquisitive, and smart goldador named AJ. This sweet pup was destined to become a superhero, and he was surely destined to be Lynn's.

*AJ was sponsored by his puppy raiser, Jim Ebling, and named in memory of Jim's son and daughter-in-law's twins, Jenna and Alexander, who sadly passed away during childbirth.*

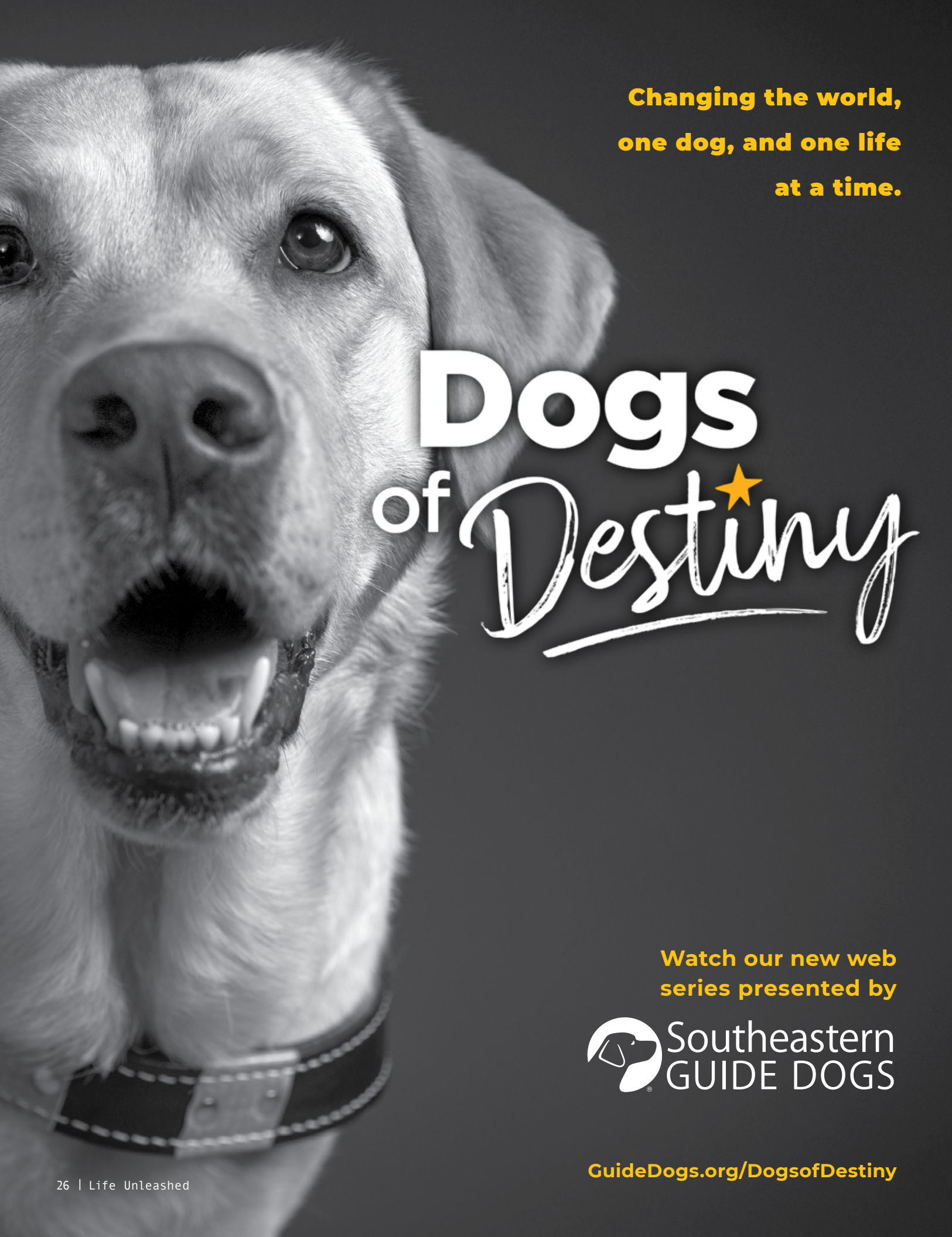


Jim Ebling (right) and his son, Jim, with AJ

Photo by Chris Lake

**SOUTHEASTERN GUIDE DOGS IS HOME TO SUPERHEROES—LIKE YOU!  
YOUR GENEROSITY IS NOTHING SHORT OF HEROIC.**





Changing the world,  
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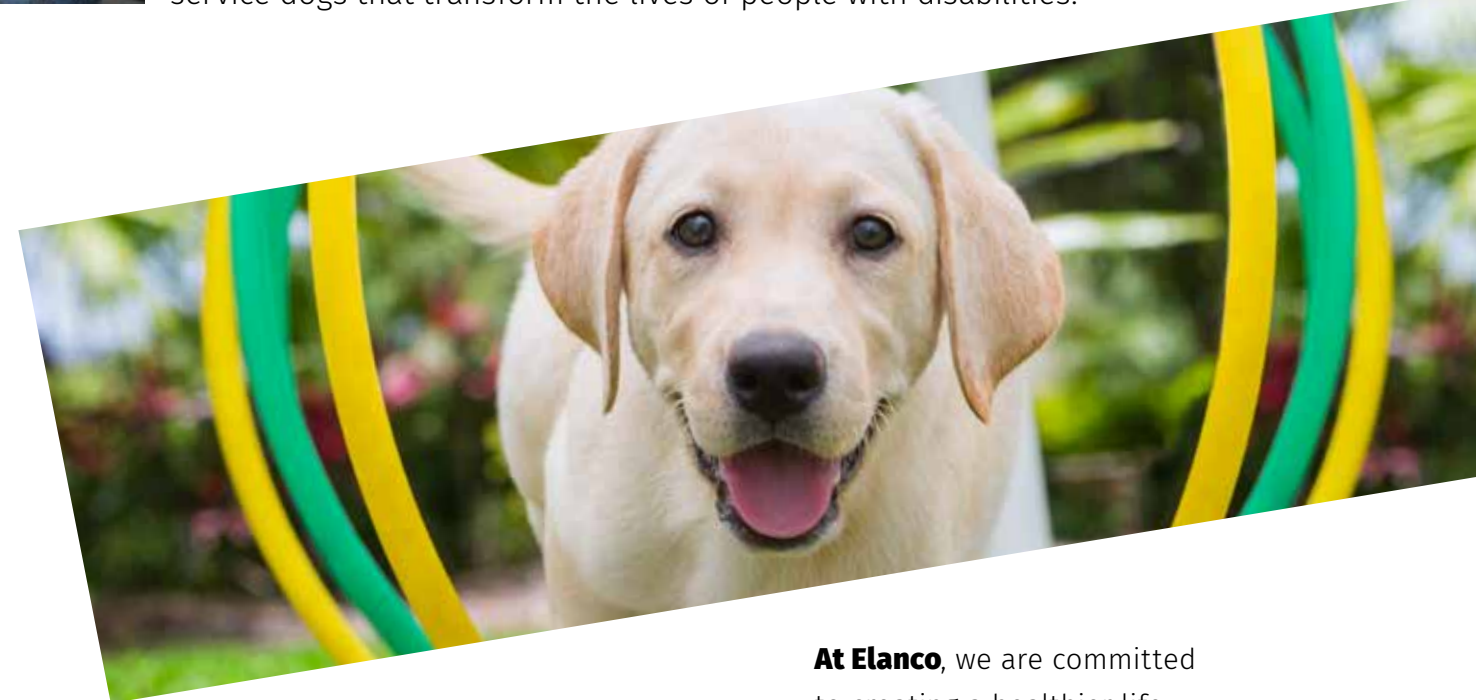


[GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny](https://www.GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny)



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# Must Love Dogs

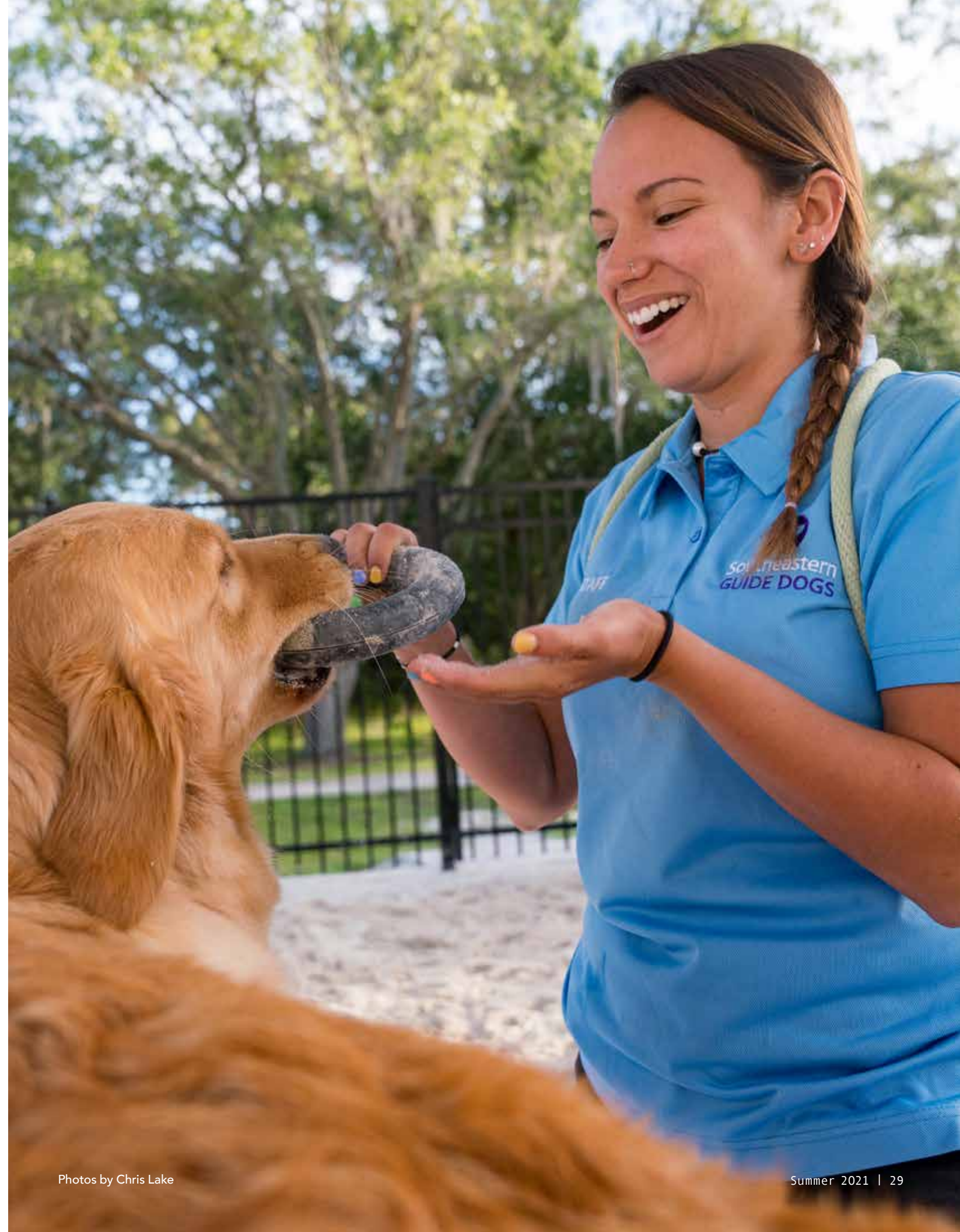
"I absolutely love this job. I could see myself working here for years to come," says 23-year-old Emilee Perkins, a college student and one of 21 Southeastern Guide Dogs canine care technicians. For the past three years, Emilee and her coworkers have poured lots of attention, plenty of sweat, and endless love into the dogs training at our Canine University.

If our certified guide and service dog instructors can be compared to college professors, then our canine care technicians can be compared to college dorm resident assistants—commonly known as RAs—the people who provide care, attention, and guidance to students living on a college campus.

Canine care technicians like Emilee are the hardworking, dog-loving caregivers providing around-the-clock positive reinforcement, manners reminders, feeding, bathing, grooming, enrichment, cuddles, belly rubs, puppy hugs, and play yard refereeing to the 100 dogs on campus at any one time. And while they're at it, they keep our dogs' residences squeaky clean; so clean, in fact, that visitors can't believe that dogs live here.

### ***Behind the Scenes: Caring for College Dogs***

Emilee's day begins at 5:00 a.m., and for the next hour and a half, she and her cohorts supervise dogs for P.E., a.k.a. running in the play yard. "They







**“The most rewarding part of being a canine care technician is watching the dogs mature from puppies just coming back from puppy raisers to being trusted and well-trained guide and service dogs.”**

—Emilee Perkins,  
Canine Care Technician



*Even though Emilee and her teammates meet hundreds of dogs each year, these special sessions create meaningful connections with every single dog.*

**“Saying goodbye to dogs as they move on to their next journey can be hard, but there’s always new dogs waiting next door that are ready to be loved on.”**

—Courtney Smithson,  
Canine Care Technician



really get excited for it,” Emilee says, and she enjoys their energy and contagious happiness. In small sessions of two-to-four dogs at a time, she and her teammates keep the dogs active, encourage them to interact with each other, and engage them with approved toys, Jolly Balls®, and lots of positive praise.

Next is breakfast time, and the canine care technicians join the instructors in feeding the dogs. Labs love their food, and feeding time goes quickly. After mealtime, the team cleans and sterilizes bowls and the kitchen area, and they’ve got the routine down to a structured science.

After breakfast, Emilee and her colleagues help instructors load vans with dogs heading out into the community to learn advanced skills with real-world obstacles and environments. For dogs whose turn it is to stay behind, she and the other canine care technicians provide special enrichment activities. And of course, they clean—a lot—which is a big job considering there are four Residence Hall wings with 82 dorm rooms. That’s a lot of dog hair!

### **Happy Days, Happy Dogs**

Enrichment might be Emilee’s favorite time of day—and the dogs’ favorite, too! They especially love the *relaxation*

*protocol.* In this special one-on-one session, canine care technicians brush a dog, stroke it, or simply sit closely together, depending on the dog’s preference and body language. Emilee waits until the dog is completely relaxed, and once she’s sure it is breathing deeply, she starts a timer to ensure each dog receives the ultimate relaxation time. Even though she and her teammates meet hundreds of dogs each year, these special sessions create meaningful connections with every single dog.

Other favorite enrichment sessions include puzzle time, which stimulates the dogs’ minds. In this activity, Emilee takes a dog into an enrichment room where she has tucked treats inside puzzles with hidden food compartments. She loves seeing different dogs’ reactions; some find the treats instantly while others take their time. Play yard enrichment is similar to P.E., except the playtime is personal between one canine care technician and one dog, who loves all the extra attention.

Emilee’s day may be filled with a dozen other dog-centered activities and tasks, but one thing remains constant, and that’s the affection that

grows between her and the dogs. “We all form relationships with the dogs over the six months that we’re together,” she shares. “When we see our dogs, they’re super excited to see us and we reciprocate. They’re all quick learners, but my favorite part is when they get goofy in the yard . . . they’re adorable!”

### **A Mission Moment: Hello, Goodbye**

After growing close to each dog, it can be hard to say goodbye when dogs graduate from training. But that’s when Emilee and her teammates often witness one of the most magical experiences of the entire Southeastern Guide Dogs cycle—one that brings the mission home. “I love taking the dogs to meet their new handlers for the first time,” Emilee shares. “Match Day is an amazing experience! That’s when we get to escort the dogs from their Canine University dorm rooms to meet their new forever friends, the people with vision loss and veterans with disabilities who train on our campus.” The dogs’ first *hello* is Emilee’s last *goodbye*, and it’s a bittersweet reminder of why her work matters. ▶





Double your Donation

# CANINE CARE CHALLENGE

We're counting on you to support the care of our dogs... and you can **double your donation!**

Our dogs provide freedom, confidence, and hope for people who cannot see, for veterans who have seen too much, and for children facing significant challenges.

It takes a staff of over 20 skilled, loving, and dedicated canine care technicians—along with an army of caring volunteers and supporters—to ensure that our dogs' needs for affection, safety, health, nutrition, and enrichment are being met. Add in the cost of food, supplies, vaccinations, preventatives, toys, puzzles, leashes, beds, bowls, and all of the other items needed, and the result is an annual budget of \$550,000 required to cover these costs.

## THE CANINE CARE COUNCIL

Generous, dog-loving donors—our friends in the **Canine Care Council**—have pledged a combined \$275,000 to create a dollar-for-dollar matching opportunity, with the goal of raising \$550,000 to fully fund this important part of our mission.

Your participation in this challenge sets you apart. Your generous gift ensures that each dog in our program will be surrounded by individualized care, loving attention, and enriched experiences while they reside on our campus.



With great appreciation for their kindness, we'd like to recognize members of the Canine Care Council

## 2021 Council Members

- Arthur S. Karp Family Foundation
- Curd Family Foundation
- Jones Family Foundation
- E. Liberty Foundation
- Roland Levy
- Marcia & Stephen Miner
- William & Kathryn Pou
- Norman & Phyllis Siskel Donor Advised Fund
- Mary Kay Strangfeld

Make a difference for our dogs, and **double your donation!**



**Double your donation today** through our Canine Care Challenge. From **now until September 30, 2021**, your gift will be **matched up to \$275,000!**

Donate today using the enclosed envelope, or visit [GuideDogs.org/care](https://www.guidedogs.org/care) for easy online giving. Thank you for caring for our dogs through your giving!



# WAYS TO GIVE AND IMPACT LIVES



HERITAGE  
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Leave a Legacy  
That Lasts

The **Heritage Society** is a group of caring individuals committed to ensuring the long term stability of our school through wills and bequests. To join, simply notify us that you have included Southeastern Guide Dogs in your will by **emailing [heritagesociety@guidedogs.org](mailto:heritagesociety@guidedogs.org)**, and find out more at **[Guidedogs.org/HS](https://Guidedogs.org/HS)**.

Remembering Southeastern Guide Dogs in your will creates a legacy of kindness, and gifts of any size impact our extraordinary dogs. Don't have a will? We've partnered with **[Freewill.com](https://Freewill.com)** to give you a simple, convenient way to write a legally valid will, at no cost. Get started on your will today by visiting **[Guidedogs.org/will](https://Guidedogs.org/will)**.

**Consult your tax professional for advice, and thanks for giving!**



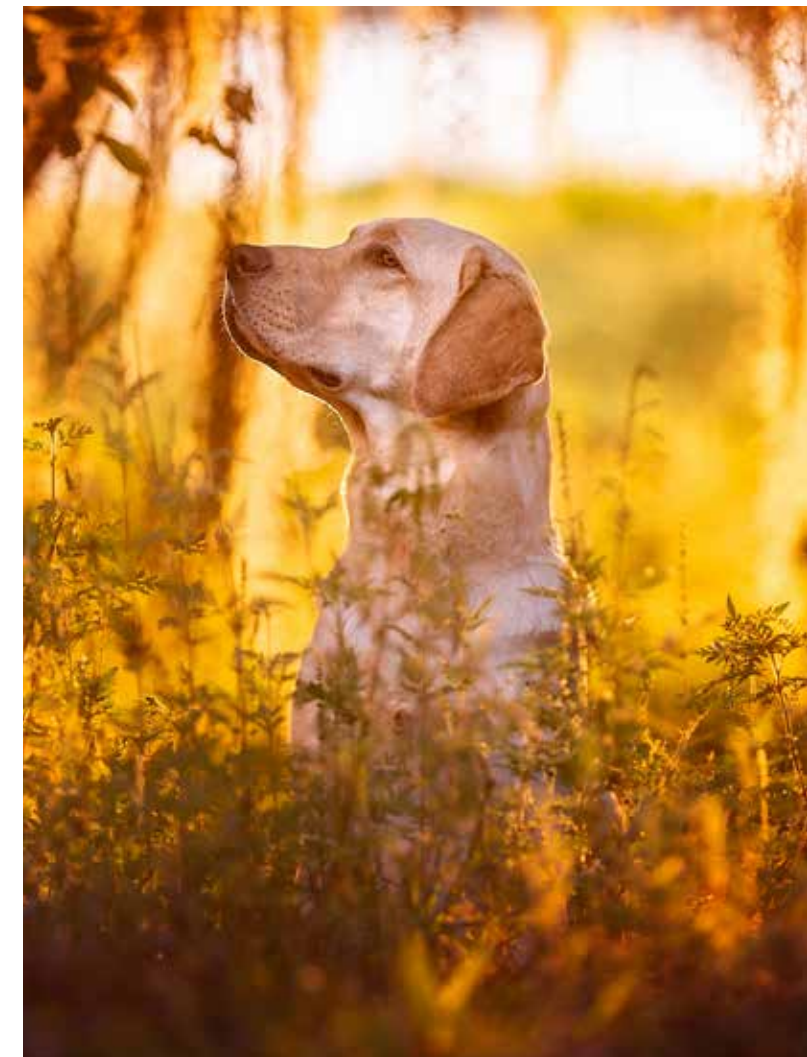
Sustaining dollars are the bedrock of our financial strength, and our **Cornerstone Society** is an important program for like-minded members of our community who believe in our mission. Your commitment to make a lasting difference ensures that we can provide our extraordinary dogs to the people we serve.

We invite you to join the Cornerstone Society, an exceptional group of donors who pledge a recurring gift. With your multi-year commitment, you will receive the following benefits:

- Exclusive invitation to our Cornerstone Society events
- An engraved name tag identifying you as a member
- Special listing on our donor recognition wall and in our donor honor roll

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- Partner** | \$1,200–\$4,999 per year
- Benefactor** | \$5,000–\$9,999 per year
- Visionary** | \$10,000–\$49,999 per year
- Guardian** | \$50,000–\$99,999 per year
- Founder** | \$100,000+ per year



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