

# Life UNLEASHED MAGAZINE

 Southeastern  
GUIDE DOGS

FALL 2021

**Nola & Brizzy  
Find Their Way**

**When Passion  
Meets Profession**

**Are You Ready  
to Double Down?**

## The Miracle of Teamwork

Andy Haffele and Service Dog Thompson



# contents



6

**3** From our CEO



14

**6** "I Will Not Die"



20

**20** Double Down  
for the Dogs



22

**30** Ways to Give and  
Impact Lives

## from our CEO

Dear Friend,

**"We're changing the world, one dog and one life at a time."**



With more than 1,200 puppies and dogs learning in our Puppy Academy, living with puppy raisers, training at our Canine University, and helping more than 600 graduates live a fuller life, you can see that a lot of dogs change a lot of lives every single day.

But sometimes it's good to focus on one dog, changing one life. In this magazine, you'll read about a college student, Nola, and her guide dog Brizzy. And about a Navy SEAL, Andy, and his service dog, Thompson. You'll see how one dog with all its intelligence, skill, and unconditional love can create a life that is filled with hope.

Thank you for caring about our dogs and people, and for fulfilling our mission through your support. Your friendship makes the magic happen, and we are grateful that you are part of the Southeastern Guide Dogs family.

Warm regards,

*Titus Herman*

Titus Herman  
Chief Executive Officer





## from our chairman of the board

Dear Friend,

We're heading into that special time of year when our hearts are warmed by visions of holiday time spent with family, friends, and favorite pets. As a member of the Southeastern Guide Dogs family, I'm thankful for so many things.

... I'm thankful for volunteers who serve so selflessly.

... I'm thankful for donors who understand that gifts are essential to our mission.

... I'm thankful for the courageous people who trust us to match them with an extraordinary dog, one that is just right for their needs.

... I'm thankful for staff members who work so hard to pursue excellence.

... I'm thankful for dogs and the gifts they give: loyalty, friendship, a willingness to please, and that unforgettable, unconditional love.

... And I'm thankful for you. Your steadfast friendship is the foundation of our mission and future.

With gratitude and warm wishes of health and safety,

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. We breed, raise, and train elite guide dogs, service dogs, and skilled companion dogs and provide life-changing services for people with vision loss, veterans with disabilities, and children with significant challenges. We offer our premier dogs and lifetime follow-up services at no cost. Since 1982, we have successfully created thousands of guide and service dog teams throughout the U.S. and currently oversee the wellbeing of over 1,200 puppies and dogs. [GuideDogs.org](http://GuideDogs.org)

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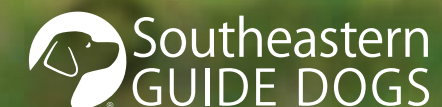
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Andy Haffele  
and Service Dog  
Thompson

# I WILL NOT DIE

A Navy SEAL's Fight for Survival

Few have what it takes to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Fewer still possess the physical strength, mental acuity, self discipline, and mission first mentality to achieve the elite title of Navy SEAL. These special operations warriors train to serve and protect through uncommon adversity and immense personal risk.

Andy Haffele is that warrior. Willing to die for his country, he never got the chance. Instead, fate handed him a personal battle, one that spilled his blood, cost his career, and thrust him into the fight of his life.







## Local shot in training

**Andrew Haffele**, a Monroe High School graduate, remains in the hospital after being wounded last week in a Navy SEALs training exercise.

By Brian Gray  
of the Times

ONECO — Gene and Sandy Haffele of Oneco received the call late Thursday, March 18, that every parent with a son or daughter serving in the military, Andrew, had been wounded and was in a hospital. Andrew Haffele, a 1997 graduate of Monroe High School, was shot during a live-fire training exercise on Kodiak Island, Alaska, last week.



right side  
exercise with  
currently  
Trauma  
Andrew's

## Special blood drive scheduled for tomorrow

Lt. j.g. Nicole Zamora  
Navy Region Hawaii  
Public Affairs

Seal Delivery Vehicle Team One's Ohana Support Network will host a blood drive from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. May 8 at the Halsey Terrace Community Center in honor of Lt. j.g. Andrew Haffele, a member of SDVT-1 who was injured during a live-fire training exercise.

Haffele received 50 units of blood through the evening of the accident and through the next morning.

"Andy has always been one to step up and help those in need. For the first time it was him who needed the help and thankfully the local blood bank was able to support," said Lt. j.g. Mike Moore, a friend and classmate of Haffele. "This drive is an effort of his shipmates and the ohana group to ensure that the Navy is doing its part to keep the local blood banks stocked to save lives in the future."

"I have donated blood before, but it never hit home just how important donating can be until this tragic event happened in my life," said Haffele. "I can't thank



US Navy Photo

Andy Haffele pauses during basic winter warfare training in Kodiak, Alaska. The training is part of the SEAL training pipeline before a prospective member is placed in a SEAL team.

provided. Any support that will be greatly appreciated," said Dana Felderman, blood drive coordinator and vice president of the Ohana Support Network.

The blood drive is open to the general public, but limited to those between the ages of eight and 60. Also, all donors must weigh more than 110 pounds.

Tripler's Blood Donor Center is providing medical staff for the event and including blood donations from the drive to its bulk transport overseas.

"In addition to saving lives at home in the United States, do-



## MILITARY HISTORY

Andy graduated from the Naval Academy in May 2001. In August, he received orders to Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training, earning his SEAL Trident pin in 2003. America's history changed forever on September 11, 2001, creating urgency in U.S. military preparedness. Meanwhile, Andy had been pursuing a long-distance relationship with Kristina, sister of an Academy classmate. Next came a wedding, followed by a training stint in Florida where Andy learned to navigate underwater submersibles. In November 2003, Andy received his first duty assignment to SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team ONE (SDVT-1) in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

"We were so young when we flew out to Hawaii," Kristina recalls. "We had arrived in paradise."

"I was going to be the third officer in that platoon," Andy says. "It was supposed to be a really fun tour for me; I would learn the officer side of things but also get to be another gun in the stack and learn a lot of the enlisted craft along the way."

In just four months, everything fell apart.

## THE ACCIDENT

"On March 18, 2004, we were doing a live fire field training exercise," Andy explains. "It's arguably one of the more dangerous things that we do in the SEAL community, where you are shooting and moving in a controlled, chaotic fashion. And unfortunately for me, we were doing that dynamic movement and I was accidentally shot in the chest by one of my teammates." On the ground, the quick thinking of corpsman Marcus Luttrell—who had joined the team just 36 hours earlier—helped keep Andy alive.

Kristina was on the North Shore when she got the call. "Get to Queens Hospital as soon as you can. Your husband has been shot."

"When I walked in, I knew it was bad because they were waiting for me with social workers," Kristina says. "The entire command was there, and a whole roomful of Navy SEALs stood up when I came in the room."

Andy had been shot with a military assault rifle from about 15 feet away. The blast pulverized his right shoulder and nearly cost him his life—several







times over. Fellow SEAL Mike Murphy pulled the trigger, a mistake that would haunt him.

"I don't remember the bullet impact," Andy says. "I remember waking up on the ground, trying to figure out what happened. I was dying, bleeding out my back. I'd been hit in an artery. Marcus Luttrell was the first of many angels to save my life."

### MIRACLES HAPPEN

Andy stands in awe of "miracles" that kept him alive. The hospital's primary surgeon had keys in the ignition, ready to leave, when a Blackhawk helicopter landed on the roof. Despite an exhausting 24-hour shift, he doubled back to investigate. "He was the next angel to save my bacon," Andy says.

The surgeon pulled Kristina aside. "I'm going to be very blunt with you," he said. "He lost 50 units of blood in the OR; we almost lost him on the table; and he's still bleeding internally. We've done all we can. It's in God's hands now."

"So, the next 48 hours were up and down," Kristina says. "He was on life support, hooked up to every IV you could imagine, and they were pumping in more blood. The doctor explained that they had almost lost him three times; that it was a miracle that he had come out of that."

### NEVER QUIT

The first time Kristina saw him, doctors started waking Andy from an induced coma. Intubated, he struggled to communicate. Grasping pen and paper with his non-dominant left hand, he scribbled *I love you*. And next: ***I will not die.***

"That's just a testimony to Andy's never-quit attitude," Kristina says. "That's part of why he got through SEAL training because he had that mentality. And I truly, truly believe that the mentality that kept him alive is he just didn't know how to quit."

Andy lost more than blood. He lost the opportunity to train with his platoon. During a long, painful recovery, he lost 40 pounds, endured more surgeries, and spent thousands of hours in rehab. But the trauma wasn't over.

Just six weeks later, Andy was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

"My wife and I were distraught," Andy says. "We didn't know how much worse it could get." Another surgery, low-dose radiation, and then he experienced another miracle. "I've been cancer-free ever since, so amen."

### "WHY ME?"

For the next year, Andy's "Why me?" thoughts became intrusive, accompanied by, "Am I going to use my arm again? Am I going to be a SEAL? Am I going to be able to have kids?"

"I was pretty angry," Andy says. "On top of that, it was our first year of marriage, and I'm trying to figure out this woman and how we're going to make it." And while the SEAL community and their families were supportive, the couple often felt alone. "We had to figure this out together on this lonely rock in the middle of the Pacific."

In June 2005, Andy's platoon was getting ready to deploy. "It's about a year after my injury; my arm is up and down; they think they won't have to cut it off, and I wasn't deploying anywhere," Andy says. "My wife says, 'Hey Andy, you need to call Mike up.' I resisted, but because of my newfound faith, I called Mike and said, 'Hey, man, I know things aren't good between us, and I'm trying to forgive you. I wish you well. Take care of the guys, be safe, and I'll see you when you get back.'"

These were Andy's last words to Mike.

### A SURVIVOR. ALONE

On June 28, 2005, Andy got the news that shocked America: 19 service members died in a firefight in the mountains of Afghanistan. Code named Operation Red Wings, this Taliban-targeted counterinsurgent mission and subsequent extraction attempt resulted in one of the worst days in U.S. Special Operations history.

Only Marcus Luttrell made it out alive, his harrowing escape later chronicled in the book and



Marcus Luttrell (with service dog Rigby) kept Andy alive on the scene of the shooting and inspired him to contact Southeastern Guide Dogs

movie, *Lone Survivor*. Close friends Mike "Murph" Murphy, Matthew "Axe" Axelson, and many others lost their lives.

In the weeks that followed, Andy and Kristina attended funeral after funeral, sharing grief among the close-knit SEAL community. Meanwhile, Andy's internal battle simmered, fueled by survivor's guilt. If not for the accident, his name would be among the dead.

"When I got shot, I was very angry, very bitter, very upset," Andy says. "'Why me, God? What did I do?' And that same question flipped on itself after June 28. 'Why me, God? Why am I still here? Why can't I trade places with any of those men?'"

Andy continued with therapy and surgeries to improve function in an arm plagued with permanent nerve damage, and after four years, he received a medical discharge. Today, he works in IT for a local law enforcement agency and lives in the peaceful mountain town of Eagle, Colorado.

### NO PEACE

But peace eluded him, despite the surrounding beauty of the Colorado outdoors. Their family grew, and three young boys filled Andy and Kristina's lives with the commotion that young, energetic boys bring to the table.

"Andy was a complete warrior that first few years after his injury," Kristina shares. "He was living in the moment of, 'I've been given a second chance.' The hardships didn't come until later. There was a time when he didn't have work for nine months, and he would see something he wanted to do. And it hit him, like wow, I can't even apply for so many of these jobs because my body won't allow me to do what's required."

"It was the first time that life had slowed down enough that he had to process those past four or five years that had happened so quickly, all the friends he had lost, how many funerals we had been to. All these dark things started to creep in for him, ▶





# PUPPY REWIND



## Empathetic Thompson

Of the six puppies the VanRiper family has raised, Amy VanRiper says that Thompson was “THE sweetest, most easily trainable, attentive, and compliant dog.” Thompson was their fourth Southeastern Guide Dogs puppy and the first one raised by their son, Nick, when he was just 17.

Thompson adored Nick and was eager to please, whether working, playing, or just chilling by his side. A happy, contented dog, she charmed everyone except the family cat, who responded to Thompson’s friendliness with face smacks and hisses.

Empathy was Thompson’s gift. When Amy suffered a serious shoulder injury, her physical therapy treatments were grueling. “I think she could sense a change in my breathing or my emotions, because she would get concerned about me,” Amy says. “She was quite in tune with the feelings of those around her.” The VanRipers believed that Thompson would someday be an amazing source of calm and peace for a veteran, and now they’re thrilled that she has found her perfect match.

Thompson is sponsored and named in honor of Thompson & Company, a supporter of Southeastern Guide Dogs’ veterans programs.

and sadly, he turned into a different person. He started to get very reclusive. He would avoid the family, and the boys could easily upset him. The man that was so fun loving and just so dialed in—now I felt like we were walking on eggshells.”

“I had rougher days than others, like Memorial Day and June 28 and whatnot,” Andy says. “Those days will always be heavy. But I was able to process them, and there weren’t many negative side effects. Around 2013, my youngest son was probably a year old, when I really started to have issues in the house. I was highly volatile and would fly off the handle over minuscule stuff. I couldn’t seem to get better on my own.”

Andy and Kristina continued talk therapy, and Andy was treated for clinical depression. “Everything improved, but there were ups and downs along the way,” he explains. “But I knew there were other options out there, and knowing how much his dog, Rigby, helped Marcus, I reached out to him and said, ‘Hey, you know what man? I’m not doing great. And I was wondering how you went about getting your service animal, to see if that would help me.’ And that is ultimately what led Thompson into our lives.”

## PRINCESS THOMPSON

Rigby was born and trained at Southeastern Guide Dogs, so Marcus connected Andy with our school. In 2017, a certified instructor flew to Colorado and matched Andy with service dog Thompson, where in the Haffele home, she now reigns as the princess of peace.

“Thompson’s personality is nothing but unfiltered love,” Andy shares. “Her addition to our family has been miraculous. She’s a calming presence. I’m the reason she’s here, but everybody loves Thompson. She has that gift—if you’re looking into those dark brown eyes, that soul of hers, she pierces through your heart and is able to calm you down no matter what state you’re in.”

“She is the best, most natural homeopathic fix for depression,” he adds. There’s a lot of different things that I do to keep my head and heart in check that add to the success, but she’s



**Dogs**  
of *Destiny*

To hear more about service dog Thompson and veteran Andy Haffele, watch “Storm Before the Calm” at [GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny](https://GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny)

definitely a key ingredient in that equation. When Thompson has her coat on, she’s in work mode—she’s totally dialed in to listening to what I have to say. But when her coat comes off, she excels in just being natural Thompson and spreading that love to everybody. She enjoys just being a dog and a member of the family.”

“Thompson is a constant in his life,” Kristina says. “If he’s having a bad day, just to be able to reach down and have that warm heartbeat; that warm, fuzzy body next to you to pet and let your stresses go. She brings out a different joy and happiness in him.”

Looking back at the friends he’s lost, Andy has found a level of acceptance. “In a nutshell, how I honor their memory is to be the best dad and husband that I can be,” he says. And the Haffele family relies heavily on their faith. “We play the cards that were dealt as best that we can and ask

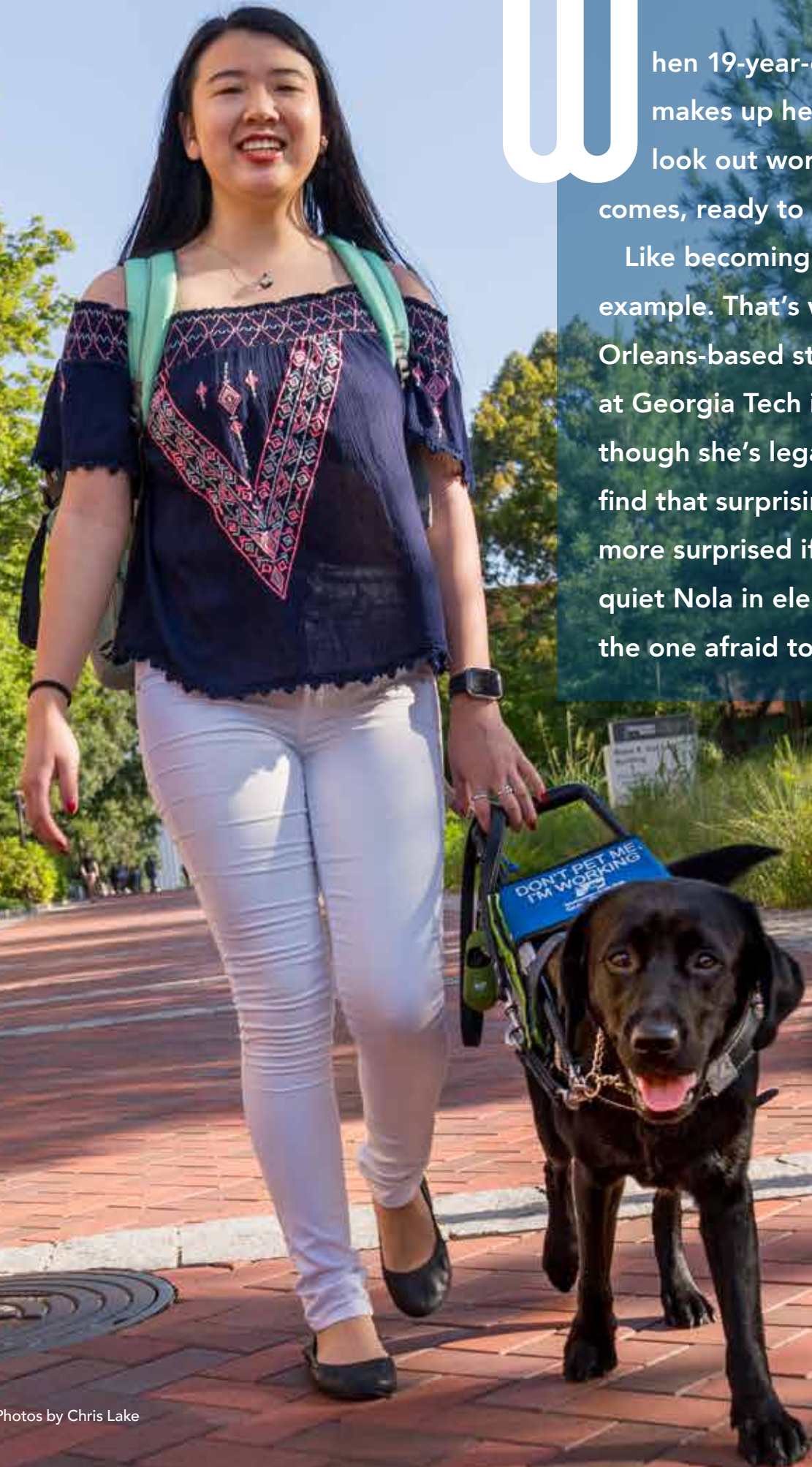
for God’s strength and guidance.”

In Andy’s painful journey to wholeness, Thompson is a beautiful, priceless miracle. “Thompson has such a huge heart,” he says. “She’s an incredible gift to my family, and my mind is blown away at how giving and generous everyone has been at Southeastern Guide Dogs.” ●

**THANK YOU FOR GIVING HOPE AND HEALING TO VETERANS LIKE ANDY THROUGH EXTRAORDINARY DOGS LIKE THOMPSON. YOUR GIFTS TRANSFORM LIVES.**



LOOK OUT WORLD  
HERE I COME  
NOLA AND BRIZZY



**W**hen 19-year-old Nola Timmins makes up her mind—well, look out world, here she comes, ready to make it happen. Like becoming an architect, for example. That’s what this New Orleans-based student studies at Georgia Tech in Atlanta, even though she’s legally blind. If you find that surprising, you’d be even more surprised if you met the shy, quiet Nola in elementary school, the one afraid to use her voice.

**NOLA TIMMINS & GUIDE DOG BRIZZY**





Nola started school with opinions and needs, likes and dislikes, but other voices shut hers down until she became the quiet child who rarely spoke up.

Her teacher's voice repeatedly punished her for talking to others when Nola couldn't see the instructions on the board and was only trying to find out what it said.

Another teacher insisted she just move closer to the front, even though Nola's vision didn't work there, either. And another called her a "cheater" to the class after Nola asked for special accommodations to see her assignments. The teacher handed Nola a large-print version, and then Nola knew the answers right away because she's that smart.

The P.E. teacher sat her on the sidelines because of her low vision and once demanded that she keep score. He left her alone, then returned and ridiculed her when she didn't know the score for a game she could not see. "I didn't even know

what game they were playing," she recalls.

The hardest was the sixth-grade friend who told Nola, "You're using your vision as an excuse, and I'm tired of dealing with you." Despite the comfort-support from her mom, Cheryl, Nola felt alone.

### LESSONS FROM MOM

Cheryl is Nola's champion. She adopted Nola as a baby from Anhui Province in China. She insisted specialists test her vision as a five-year-old. She encouraged Nola to explore her interests, from violin to piano to dance, and equipped her with supplies as Nola taught herself to crochet and origami. For years, Cheryl cheered Nola on in aerial arts, a performance art

combining dance and acrobatics in a ballet-like choreography, while Nola suspends herself in the air by silks and hoops. For the past few years, Nola has taught aerial arts classes herself.

Cheryl taught her young daughter the value of speaking up, the blessing of giving back, the importance of advocating for your needs, and the rewards of getting back up every time you fall. And slowly, Nola found her voice.

### NOLA FINDS HER VOICE

She found it when she joined other teens on a trip to Washington, D.C. where she lobbied senators. She spoke up when she learned of a study-abroad trip to Israel, where, at 16 and with limited vision, she traveled across the world to live and learn. She was scared—but she did it afraid. She found her voice when she insisted on leaving the Louisiana school system to live with her aunt and uncle so she could finish high school in Ohio, where they took accessibility more seriously. She conquered public speaking when she presented at a TEDx-Youth event about living in a sighted world. And she consistently voiced her opinion about wanting a guide dog.

Nola grew up with no siblings and two older dogs, Mimi and Reuben. "I didn't like dogs at first," she explains. But something clicked with her aunt's dog, Spencer. "I absolutely loved Spencer; he became my favorite thing in the world."

Before New Orleans, Cheryl and Nola lived in Sarasota, Florida, near Southeastern Guide Dogs. When Nola was still in elementary school, they visited the campus and got to meet puppies. They bought a book from our gift shop about C.J. the guide dog, and from that moment, Nola set her sights on a dog of her own. "Once I found out what guide dogs were, I really wanted one," she explains.

### NOLA FINDS HER DOG

Cheryl follows our school on Facebook, and when Nola was 17, her mom saw a post about our Guide Dog Camp for teens. "At that point, I was obsessed with ►

## PUPPY REWIND



### Brizzy: One Spunky Pup

Brizzy may be a diminutive young lady, but her puppy raiser, Kathy Raker, remembers her as smart, spunky, and no pushover. "Brizzy lived with my two Labs and pretty much ruled the roost at our house," Kathy recalls. This pup played hard and worked hard with equal enthusiasm. Whether it was time to swim and retrieve pool toys or attend choir and orchestra concerts where she demonstrated her excellent down-under skill, Brizzy was in her zone.

On one of their outings together, Brizzy and Kathy visited a middle school where 13 teenagers with visual impairments learned about guide dogs. Seeing how wonderfully Brizzy engaged with the students, Kathy mused that pairing her with a teen would be ideal. "Her petite size, willingness to work, and loving personality were all assets to help a teenager get around their world," Kathy thought. When Brizzy was matched with Nola, Kathy's dreams for her pup came true. The sky's the limit for this happy team!

**Brizzy was sponsored by Gail and Paul Carroll and named in celebration of their niece Meaghan's college graduation. Meaghan chose the name Brizzy as a reminder of her amazing 2017 trip to Australia and her favorite city, Brisbane.**





“**B**eing able to walk while looking up and not looking at the ground gives me an insane sense of confidence.”

dogs,” Nola recalls. Mom and daughter attended our second-ever Guide Dog Camp in June 2019, where they learned all they needed to know. Cheryl even wore a blindfold and walked with a guide dog in harness. “She was really moved,” Nola shares. “She cried and said, ‘Now I see why you want a guide dog.’”

In February 2020, at age 18, Nola graduated from Guide Dog Class 287 with her new best friend, Brizzy. Nola couldn’t wait to take Brizzy back to high school to experience greater independence for the rest of her senior year.

But March 2020 had other ideas, and the world faced the pandemic. Nola and Brizzy returned to New Orleans, where she finished high school online amid the stay-at-home culture of the day.

### BRIZZY SAVES THE DAY

“Brizzy was definitely a lifesaver,” Nola recalls. “She got me up and out. She got me out of the house; otherwise, I would have been in bed all day. We set a walking schedule, and I practiced in the neighborhood. We worked every day until it got too hot.”

This intelligent, athletic black Lab is part goofball and part leapfrog—she loves to jump—but put her in harness, and she turns on the focus like a light bulb. Brizzy became Nola’s guide, companion, fitness buddy, confidante, and entertainment during one of the most isolating times in modern history.

In July 2021, as travel opened a bit, Nola and Brizzy boarded a plane on their own. They ventured to New York City to meet up with two other visually impaired architecture students.

“In the airport, I can’t describe the feeling—it was a sense of confidence I’ve never had before,” she shares. “Being able to walk while looking up and not looking at the ground—that’s something I learned from my instructor at Southeastern Guide Dogs, and I’m still working on it—just looking up gives me an insane sense of confidence. Even if I had no clue of where I was going, I looked like I knew. I got lost three times, but I made it because of Brizzy.”

### NOLA AND BRIZZY FIND THE FUTURE


In August, she and Brizzy left home for Georgia Tech, where Nola pushes her remaining vision to the limit as she studies architecture. As a young blind woman pursuing a non-traditional career, she’s using her voice, finding her way, and blazing a trail with Brizzy.


Moving in and starting classes was a whirlwind, and now she and Brizzy walk so much that Brizzy sleeps like a log in class. “She snores, and she sometimes barks in her sleep—she definitely makes it known that she’s sleeping,” says Nola.

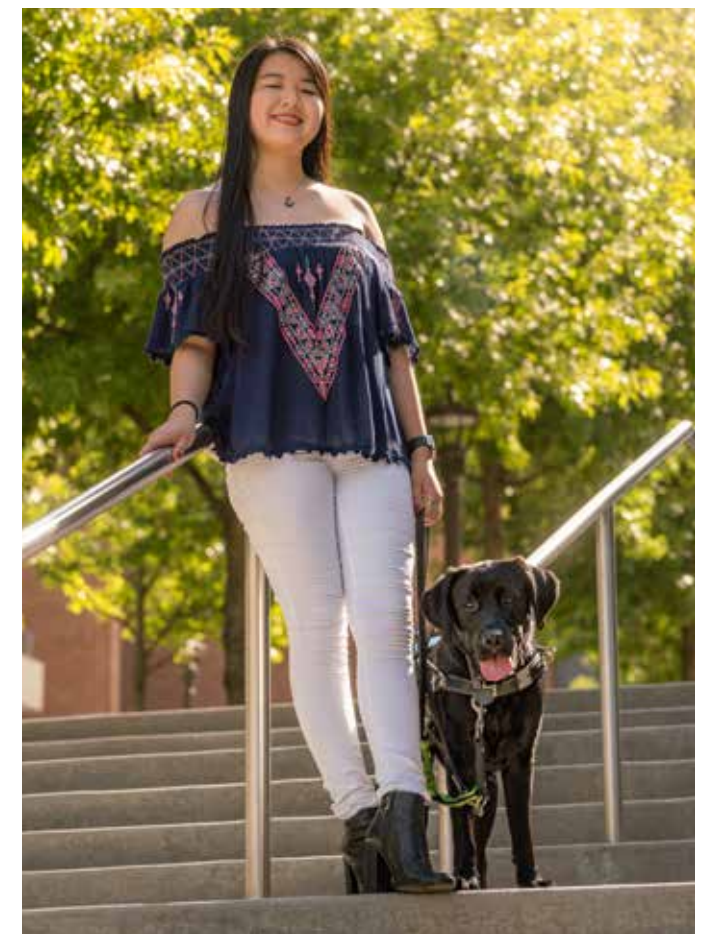
Strangers ask about Brizzy; “What’s your dog’s name?” is a favorite, and Brizzy proves to be a natural icebreaker. Usually her guide is working, but when Nola takes off the harness, people are amazed at her dog’s other personality. In seconds, Brizzy switches from a focused working dog to “crazy goofball,” saying hi to everyone and licking any face caught in proximity. “Oh my god, she’s a different dog,” Nola has heard people say.

The team is working on landmarking, as Nola uses the *find* cue to teach Brizzy specific destinations. *Find French* means find Nola’s French class. *Find arch* means find the architecture class. *Find statue* means find a specific statue on campus where Nola knows to take a turn to reach particular buildings. And *find room* will take the team back to Nola’s dorm room.

“It’s really freeing, having Brizzy,” Nola says. “I don’t have to explain myself to everybody that I’m legally blind. I’m not getting crazy weird looks when someone reads me a menu, and they don’t ask if English is my second language. So many times, I’ve wanted to quit architecture, but Brizzy is always there, reminding me that I can do it. It’s like she knows what’s going on, and she’s always there, cheering me on.” ●

 To watch Nola on the TEDx-Youth stage, visit <https://youtu.be/rvMBchVYjfQ>

 To see Brizzy’s antics on Instagram, search @nolaandbrizzy



**WHEN YOU SUPPORT DOGS LIKE BRIZZY, YOU PAVE THE WAY FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS LIKE NOLA.**



# Double Down A dollar-for-dollar match up to \$500,000! for the Dogs

When you *double down*, you strengthen your commitment to a strategy or a course of action. In blackjack, you double your original bid, putting money behind the confidence in your hand.



**Today, Gary and Melody Johnson are doubling down for the dogs.**

These special friends and supporters of Southeastern Guide Dogs have doubled down on their generosity. Last year, this Tampa couple offered to match all donations dollar for dollar up to \$500,000, and you came through for us!

Now, this dog loving couple has done it again. They're offering a new **Double Down for the Dogs** challenge up to \$500,000 again! When you support our dogs, the Johnsons will match your donation, and you'll double your impact.

That's double the freedom . . . double the independence . . . double the hope . . . and double the love for our extraordinary dogs and the people by their sides.

We never charge a fee for the life changing guide dogs, service dogs, and skilled companion dogs we provide to people with vision loss, veterans with disabilities, and children with significant challenges. That's why you make such a difference.

Please give today and **Double Down for the Dogs** with us!

**x2 Double Down for the Dogs**

with Gary and Melody Johnson. Use the provided envelope or visit [GuideDogs.org/double](https://www.GuideDogs.org/double) to give online. Donate today and it will be matched, dollar for dollar, up to **\$500,000**.



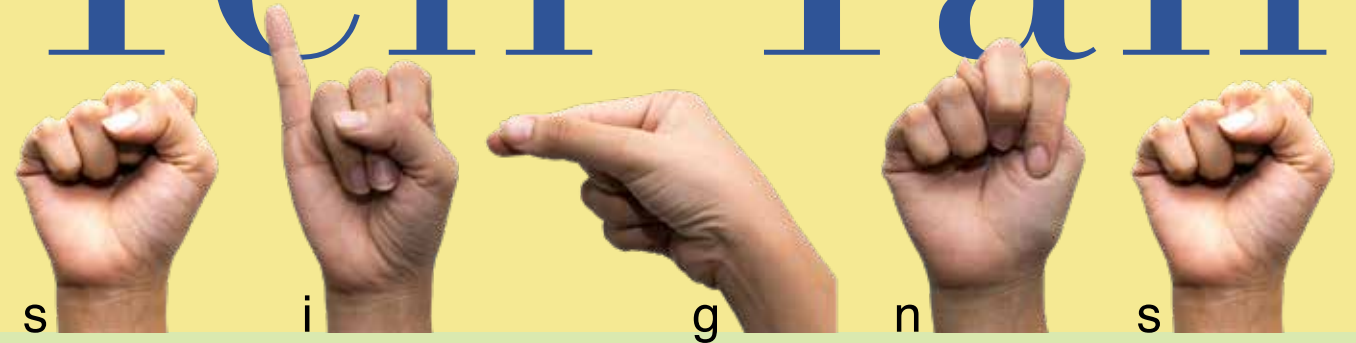
On behalf of our dogs, students, veterans, and alumni teams, *thanks a million* from Gary, Melody, and all of us at Southeastern Guide Dogs.







# Tell-Tail



**O**n a warm summer day, guide dog instructor Christine Fulton walks the Southeastern Guide Dog campus with a handsome yellow Lab named Peyton by her side. The team practices “intelligent disobedience,” an important skill for a guide dog whose job it is to keep its handler safe.

“We teach our dogs traffic awareness,” Christine explains. “So, if the handler gives the dog the *forward* cue, and the dog senses there’s a safety hazard, the dog will not move, no matter how much the person repeats it.”

Christine motions Peyton to go forward, and the attentive dog stands firm, ignoring her request. Just then, a car whizzes around the corner, proving Peyton has been listening in class. Christine praises him and rewards him with a treat. “These dogs are amazing,” she gushes. “And to watch them make decisions on their own is fascinating.”

Christine knows a thing or two about making hard decisions. Her journey to Southeastern Guide Dogs began at a crossroads, when she had to choose whether to listen to her head or follow her heart.

## Growing up CODA

The middle child of three, Christine grew up in Danville, Kentucky, a quaint town in bluegrass country, not far from Lexington. Danville is home to the Kentucky School for the Deaf, where Christine’s father, Joe Buschmann, taught for 27 years. “I am a CODA,” says Christine. “That’s an acronym for a *Child of Deaf Adults*.”

Christine’s parents, Joe and Carleen, were both born deaf due to a birth defect, while all three children can hear. “It helps me to be more empathetic,” she says. “Deaf people can do everything you and I can do, except hear.”

**A child of Deaf parents, Christine Fulton developed empathy that led her from the world of finance to the joy of changing lives.**





i love you

## Team Peyton

Peyton was sponsored by the Southshore Puppy Raisers and named in honor of Peyton Manning, a superstar quarterback in the National Football League. The group liked the idea of naming a future superstar hero after an outstanding and respected athlete. Puppy raiser Allison Halsema of Apollo Beach, Florida, volunteered to raise Peyton for 14 months in 2019 and 2020.



“People often ask me, ‘how did you learn to speak?’” Christine muses. She learned American Sign Language (ASL) before she could speak, then learned to speak like any other child. “My parents can speak and taught us, and I had influences around me—television, friends, family, school, so that wasn’t an issue.”

### “But He’s Your Dog”

A shy and quiet child, Christine felt more comfortable with animals than people. “Getting me a dog was the best thing my mother ever did,” she recalls fondly.

A stray named Rusty was her first. “My grandma found a puppy that had wandered onto her porch and asked me to take him and find his home,” she starts. “My mom gave me a deadline and said, ‘If you don’t find the dog’s owner by this date, take him to Scotty.’

Scotty was a boy down the street who wanted the dog.”

Christine searched for the rightful owner but came up empty. When the deadline rolled around, she reluctantly put a leash on Rusty and started towards Scotty’s house. As she passed her grandmother’s house, Christine’s mom came out and asked where she was headed. “You told me if we didn’t find Rusty’s home, take him to Scotty,” she replied.

“But he’s your dog,” said her mom. Those four words made Christine jump for joy. “It was the happiest day of my life,” she gushes. Her mom’s words and Rusty’s wagging tail were the first steps in her journey to Southeastern Guide Dogs. But it didn’t happen right away.

### Investing in the Future

Shortly after high school, Christine married her childhood friend, Chad Fulton. Chad joined the Army, the couple moved to Germany, and Christine got a job as a bank teller on Ramstein Air Force Base. “I loved finance,” she recalls. “We had several different currencies that we dealt with, and it was a lot of fun.”

When the couple moved back to the States three years later, Christine took her knack for finance and majored in corporate finance and investments at Northern Kentucky University. She graduated summa cum laude, was named Finance Student of the Year, and landed two lucrative internships. The internship with Morgan Stanley led to a full-time job offer as a financial advisor and analyst. “It was my dream job,” she recounts.

Over the next several years, Christine worked for other prestigious financial institutions. She made good money and climbed the corporate ladder in a competitive, high-stakes industry. ▶



Christine with her brother and her first dog, Rusty



“Getting me a dog was the best thing my mother ever did. It was the happiest day of my life.”





## Head vs. Heart

Despite the accolades and success, Christine felt empty. “My parents instilled in us to give back to the community, and I didn’t feel I was doing that,” she sighs. “It was hard to imagine that this is what I was supposed to do in life.”

She felt torn between personal and professional bliss. Leaving a successful, 17-year career felt reckless, but she wasn’t happy. “I stopped smiling,” she says tearfully. “There was so much work put into building that career, and to leave it behind was hard.”

Christine searched for a sign, something to guide her to a new profession. She remembered the wise words of a college professor: “Find what you’re passionate about and figure out how to make money doing it.” She realized she was passionate about two things—American Sign Language and dogs.

“I could be a teacher for the Deaf or a certified ASL interpreter,” she reasoned. “But it would mean going back to college.” Scratch that. “What about dogs? My mind exploded with ideas and excitement,” she exclaims. She enrolled in Animal Behavioral College and earned a certification as a professional trainer.

## The Sign

Christine and Chad moved to Parrish, Florida in 2016, where she started her own dog training business. It was a first step to gain experience for a career in the dog training world, and far more fulfilling than finance.

Then one day, while driving south on I-275, a billboard caught Christine’s eye. A Southeastern Guide Dogs Labrador smiled back at her with the message, “Heroes Train Here.” It wasn’t the sign she expected but was exactly the sign she needed. Here was the potential to work with dogs and serve people in need.

Christine searched online and within no time, started volunteering at Southeastern Guide Dogs in the training kennel, the forerunner to Canine University. She was hooked. Next, she hired on as a canine care technician, learning the husbandry part of dog care.

“I loved it,” she laughs. “I couldn’t believe I was getting paid to hang out with dogs all day.”

Christine came home from work one night, tired, sweaty, and admittedly smelling of bug spray, sunblock, and dogs. Despite the curious odor, Chad recognized his wife’s beautiful glow. “He said, ‘Wow, this is you—happy.’” Christine gets emotional recounting his words. “I knew at that moment this is where I’m meant to be.”



Dogs of Destiny

To hear more about Christine Fulton's journey, watch "Tell-Tail Signs" at [GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny](http://GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny)

## Passion Meets Profession

Christine was awarded a highly coveted guide dog apprenticeship in 2017. In December 2020, after three years of rigorous hands-on training, required reading, studying, and testing, and only four years after that Lab beckoned her from a sign on the highway, she became a certified guide dog instructor.

“There are so many things that make me passionate about what we do here,” she beams.

Once a guide dog becomes “class ready,” another rewarding cycle begins—matching the dog with a visually impaired individual and—in a class setting on campus—teaching them to work together as a team. “We watch this person learn how to use this new tool that gives them freedom,” Christine explains. “And at the end of three weeks, everyone is smiling, even the dog. It’s really exciting.”

Christine’s childhood in the Deaf community taught her the meaning of disability, ability,

and empathy. Her financial career boosted her confidence. And her love of dogs awakened her passion. “Everything I did up to this point prepared me for this,” she remarks.

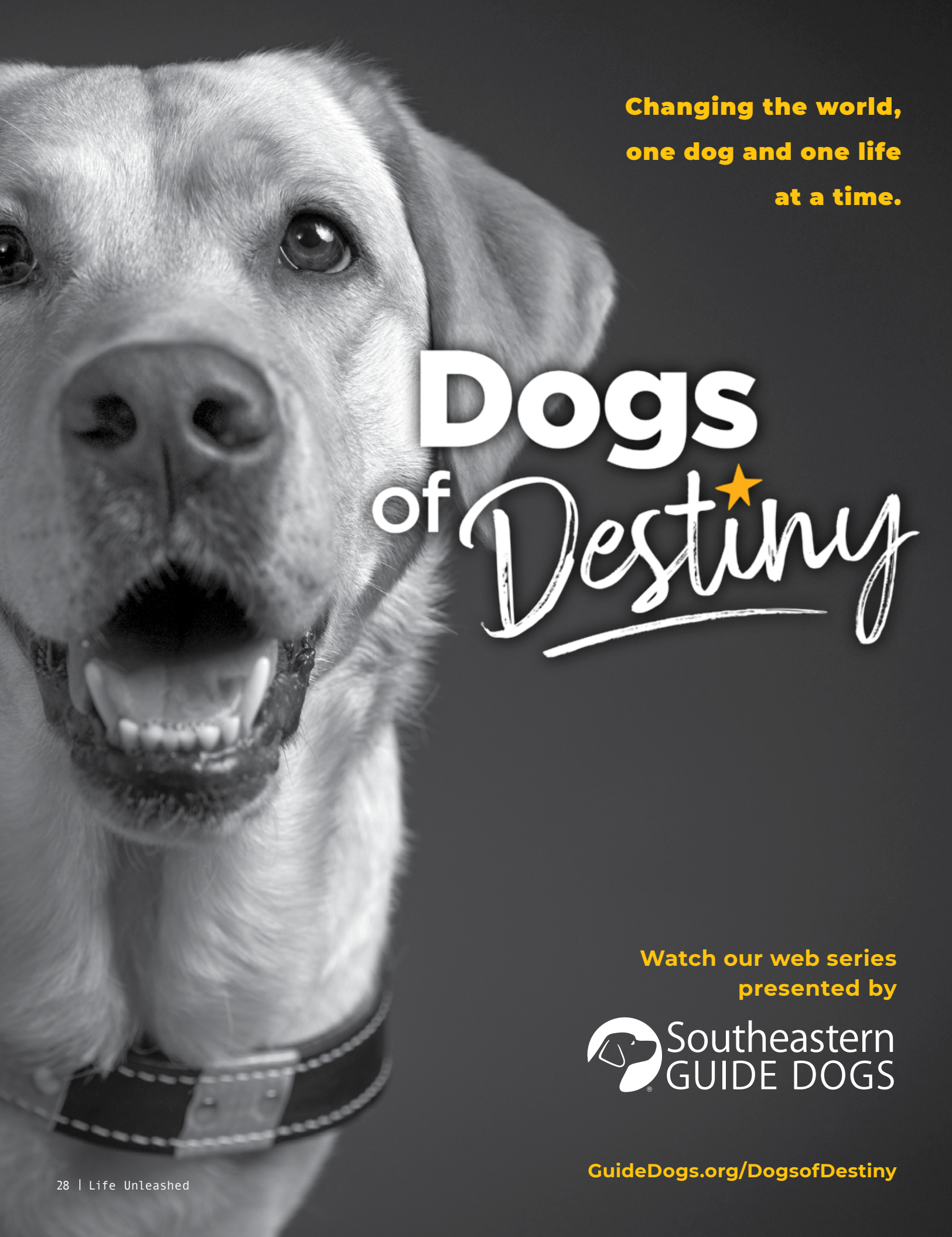
Back at the crosswalk, the coast is clear. Christine motions Peyton forward, and this time, he safely leads her across the street. She beams as she praises him, knowing it’s time. He’s ready to be a guide dog, and she’s ready to hand over his leash.

“It’s not hard to let him go because he’s not meant for me. He’s meant for somebody else,” she says. “Letting him go is the most rewarding part of my job.” After training the dogs, teaching the humans, and sending them off to a new life of freedom and confidence, Christine will meet another class of dogs and begin the cycle all over again.

For Christine, this is her happy place. The rewards are rich—and of course, priceless. ●

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at a time.

# Dogs of *Destiny*

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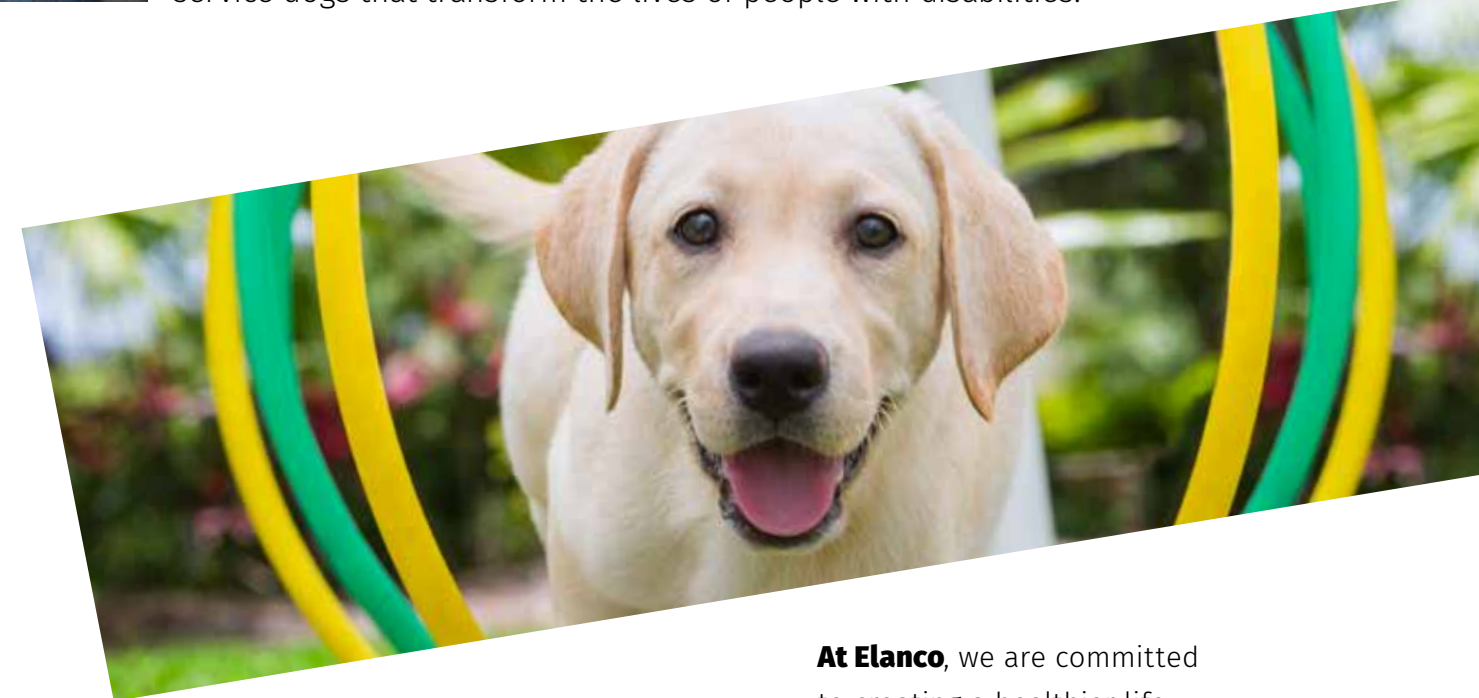


[GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny](http://GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny)



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## Leave a Legacy That Lasts

## HERITAGE SOCIETY

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** 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)**.

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