

# Growing Up Together

**Everybody needs  
a best friend**

**KIDS + DOGS = BFFs**

**FROM FRAIL TO FEARLESS**

**FINDING HOPE**



# contents

3 From our CEO

4 From our Chairman of the Board

6 Junie's Joy

8 Best Friends

12 Anatomy of a Best Friend

14 Hoping for Hope

16 When Lillee Met Sally

22 Best Friends Matching Challenge

## from our CEO

Dear Friend,

Welcome to *Life Unleashed*. We're dedicating this issue to children, teens, and the dogs that become their best friends. When faced with vision loss or the loss of a parent in the military, young people can feel alone, anxious, and disconnected from their peers.

Happily, our dogs become loyal companions, ice breakers, friend-makers—and most of all—life changers. Whether paired with a guide dog, a Kids Companion Dog, or a Gold Star Family Dog, the young people we serve find security, confidence, love, and hope in these wagging tails and giant hearts.

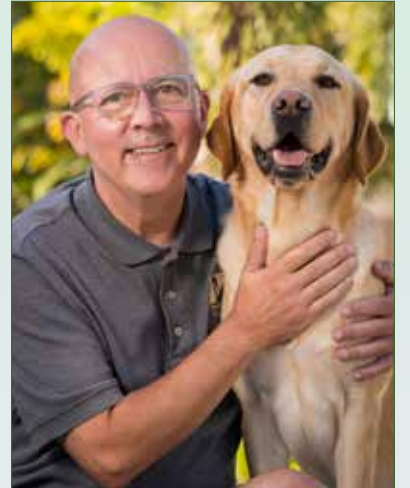
Thank you for all you do to make our children's and teens' programs so meaningful. Your steadfast help and generosity make all the difference.

Together, we're transforming lives, one dog and one hope-filled story at a time. I hope you enjoy meeting a few of our young friends today.

Warm regards,



Titus Herman  
Chief Executive Officer



6



8



14



16



## from our chairman of the board

Dear Friend,

Whenever our board of directors meets, we hear about how our amazing dogs fulfill wishes and dreams for so many people who need them. More and more, this includes stories about vulnerable children and teens. Being in the healing profession, I am especially gratified to be a part of such an inspiring mission.

Our Kids Companion Dogs give the gift of friendship and love to children with vision loss. Guide dogs give the gift of confidence and freedom to teens who have dreamed of a dog since they were very young. Gold Star Family Dogs help heal the hearts of children who have lost a military parent.

In this issue, we spotlight the many ways our dogs help young people with significant challenges. And as always, we thank you for the role you play in making youthful hopes and dreams come true.

Warmest regards,



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



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# 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 well-being of over 1,200 puppies and dogs. [GuideDogs.org](http://GuideDogs.org)

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forever.



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Join the Southeastern Guide Dogs Heritage Society today  
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The Heritage Society is a group of caring individuals committed to ensuring the long term stability of our school through wills and bequests.

Remembering Southeastern Guide Dogs in your will creates a legacy of kindness, and gifts of any size impact our extraordinary dogs.

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](http://GuideDogs.org/HS).



# Junie's Joy

A boy, a dog,  
and a mom  
who wouldn't  
give up

Junie & **MERLOT**  
Kids Companion Dog



Absolutely inseparable, five-year-old Junie and his dog, Merlot, jump on the trampoline, splash in the pool, climb trees, and run around the family farm. Despite his blindness, Junie fearlessly embraces the world around him.

But life wasn't always happy for Junie.

"This child is extremely aggressive," the social worker once warned 24-year-old Destiny, an Army veteran and single person who chose to foster children, specifically severe cases. "This child bites—hard. He hits, he headbutts; you cannot approach this child. He's blind, autistic, nonverbal, and he can't walk. Doctors call him 'feral.'"

Destiny saw a two-year-old baby, alone and afraid. Calmly, she asked, "Do you want to let me hold you?"

Junie clung to her as if she was his last hope.

"I just held him into my bones; no part of me ever wanted to let him go," Destiny shares. "He was desperate to feel safe. And I wanted nothing more than to let him feel safe."

What a difference love makes. Junie went home with Destiny who was then caring for four other foster girls. She welcomed emergency placements and gave respite care to other foster families.

"I got attached to every single kid that came through my door," she says. "Every goodbye was absolute heartbreak." Destiny cared for 14 children in all, but Junie was different. She just couldn't let him go.

After mountains of paperwork and biological family turmoil, Destiny finally adopted Junie. They moved to

Florida near family and the farm, and through song, she helped Junie communicate and learn. After sharing in a Facebook group about their nature walks, she received an unexpected message from a Southeastern Guide Dogs staff member about our Kids Companion Dogs for children with vision loss. As a result, Merlot soon joined this sweet family.

Junie only recently learned to talk, but he sings to Merlot all day long. "Merlot matches Junie's personality to a tee," Destiny says. "The two of them are so hyper, happy, and loving. And they're both super snugglers. The two of them end up hugging each other to sleep. It's adorable."

"Merlot has given Junie a second person to be 100% comfortable and confident with," she adds. "He's learning that mom is not the only safe person in this world. He's learning, 'I can trust this dog—and I can be someone that this dog can trust.' They are going to be best friends for years to come." ●

Dogs  
of  
Destiny

Watch a video version  
of "Junie's Joy" at  
[GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny](https://www.GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny)







# best friends

## FROM FOLLOWER TO LEADER: HOW A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT FOUND HER CONFIDENCE



**"You're only in high school?"** asks the coffee shop barista after spotting Annabell's school ID and her guide dog, Barry. "You're so independent and well-spoken!"

At 17, Annabell wasn't always confident. "I was the follower for a long time," she says. "But since I got Barry, the person who liked to be one with the crowd is no longer there. He's a big confidence boost!"

As an infant, Annabell's eyes shook uncontrollably from nystagmus. She screamed in sunlight. Doctors misdiagnosed her until her sister was born with the same condition, and genetic testing revealed a rare condition, *achromatopsia*. She sees only shades of gray, and everything washes out in bright light. "Light is not my best friend," Annabell says candidly.

Annabell &  
Guide Dog  
**BARRY**





### Vision Snapshot: Achromatopsia



What people see with normal vision.



What people see with achromatopsia.

People with achromatopsia see only black, white, and shades of gray—without color. The condition causes extreme sensitivity to light, resulting in “day blindness.”



“HE’S DEFINITELY LIFE CHANGING. I CAN’T WAIT TO GO TO COLLEGE WITH BARRY.”

## “THAT CALL FROM SOUTHEASTERN GUIDE DOGS WAS A BEAM OF HOPE.”

At 14, she and her mom attended our first Guide Dog Camp for teens, and soon, Annabell determined to get a dog of her own. At 16, she got the phone call inviting her to guide dog class.

“That call was a beam of hope,” she recalls. “It was a really dark time. I was recovering from COVID; I had so much to catch up on at school, and it was chaos all around me. I thought, ‘Oh my god, this is happening,’ and, ‘Life will get better now!’ I was so excited to meet my dog.”

The two have been inseparable ever since.

“He’s a huge cuddler,” Annabell says. “He’s super intelligent and very sassy—our personalities mesh very well.”

Having a dog in high school comes with challenges. Annabell wakes early to take care of him. She puts up with insensitive peers—some boys once followed her, barking. They were suspended, and meanwhile, the 2,500 school students are learning guide dog etiquette. Despite challenges, though, Annabell wouldn’t have it any other way.

Barry guides her to classes, and she’s free to chat with friends instead of worrying about finding her way. She navigated public transportation on a trip to Chicago. “Without Barry, I would not have been able to walk on a platform or find a seat,” she says. “Barry has come with me to summer camp, and we’ve gone hiking together.”

“If I didn’t have my guide dog, where would I be right now?” she reflects. “Would I be in a place where I feel confident advocating for myself? He’s definitely life changing. I can’t wait to go to college with Barry. And I swear he understands English because I talk to him all the time. He gets to hear everything because we are best friends.” ●

With help from friends like you, teens like Annabell can have best friends like Barry.



# Guide Dog Camp

## for Teens with Vision Loss



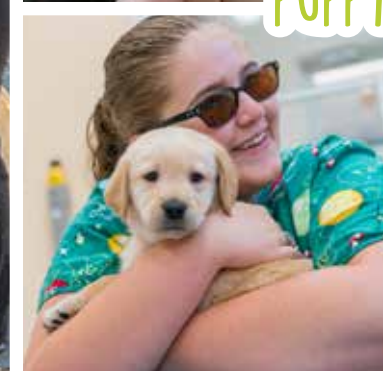
At Guide Dog Camp, 14 to 17-year-olds with vision loss and their parents learn how our guide dogs can change a teen’s life. There’s no charge for this overnight, two-day camp where teens experience the freedom of walking with a guide dog, and families learn what’s next in their journey toward independence.



Teens and parents get to experience working with a guide dog.



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For more information or to apply, visit [GuideDogs.org/Camp](https://www.guidedogs.org/camp)





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# HOPING FOR HOPE



*He lost his dad but found hope in his dog*



"I hope it's Hope, I hope it's Hope," chanted five-year-old Talon. He and his mom, Crystal, had met five dogs at Southeastern Guide Dogs. Now the day had finally come to meet their match. "We never knew which dog we might get," Crystal recalls, "but Talon had an attraction to Hope." And that's the day this loving Labrador bounded into their lives, befriended Talon, and brought fresh hope to this Gold Star Family.

"I saw a complete change in Talon's attitude when we got Hope," reflects Crystal. "He was very closed off before, emotionally. He was having a hard time in school. But after Hope, all of that seemed to go away. She was like the sunshine in a sky full of clouds, and we look forward to coming home to her every day."



Talon was an infant when he lost his dad, but Gold Star Families keep the memories alive. "There's not a day that goes by that we don't talk about him," shares Crystal. Army Special Forces Sgt. Aaron J. Blasjo died May 29, 2011, on his third deployment to Afghanistan. An improvised explosive device took four lives that day, including Aaron and his special operations dog, Hunter. "Of course, Hope doesn't replace his dad," says Crystal. "But she gives him that comfort that he needs. We always say she's a big ball of love."



While Talon never knew his dad, he watches other kids' dads rooting for them at his sports games. "The first thing he does when he gets home from a game is call his dog, because Hope's unconditional love is there for him," says Crystal.

Talon turned 11 this year, and Hope has been his best friend for over half his life. She rarely leaves his side, and most of his memories include Hope. "She's always happy," Talon says. "She always sleeps with me, and if I'm ever sad, Hope is always there for me." ●

**WHEN YOU GIVE WITH GENEROSITY,  
YOU GIVE THE GIFT OF HOPE.**

## MAKE A LASTING DIFFERENCE.

The Southeastern Guide Dogs Cornerstone Society is an exceptional community of like-minded friends making a profound impact on our mission.



You're invited to join the Cornerstone Society, a group of kind and caring donors who pledge a recurring gift.

Your commitment to make a lasting difference places extraordinary dogs into the hands of people who need them.



Enjoy exclusive events and other benefits. Join at [GuideDogs.org/CS](https://www.GuideDogs.org/CS) or call **941.729.5665**.



# When Lillee met Sally

She is born without a name, without a family, and without much hope for a future. At two days old, she is found abandoned in the courtyard of an apartment complex in a small village in China.

A kind woman finds the newborn and takes her to a nearby orphanage. She doesn't look like the other children, but that's what makes her special. Staff workers nickname her Xiao Yun, which means "Little Cloud." It seems fitting for a girl with skin and hair so opaque and white.

A world away in Mississippi, a family juggles homework, slumber parties, and after-school sports for four growing kids. They know nothing about Xiao Yun, but thanks to the power of social media, their worlds collide.

Lillee & **SALLY**  
Kids Companion Dog

Born without a name,  
without a family, and  
without much hope  
for a future







**"Sally knows Lillie's her person and she just wants to be there for her."**



"I was on Facebook, scrolling through, and I saw a post about adopting kids from China," says Deborah Edmonson, the mom with four busy kids. "There was a picture of this beautiful little girl with albinism, and I just started crying. So, I called my husband and said 'Stephen, I think God is telling us to adopt a child.'"

**S**tephen was caught off guard, reminding her that they already have four biological children. "But the more we really thought and prayed about it,

we felt it was something we were called to do," he explained.

The Edmonsons submitted adoption paperwork and waited patiently. Then one day, the social worker emailed them a file and photo of a toddler with a porcelain doll face and wisps of snow-white hair. "As soon as I saw her little face, I said 'Oh, that's our daughter!'" exclaimed Deborah. Four months later, the family boarded a plane to China.

Albinism is an inherited condition that reduces the melanin pigment formed in the skin, hair, and eyes. The lack of melanin can cause permanent vision problems. "We knew that she would be

legally blind, and we were okay with that," says Deborah.

With their new 15-month-old daughter safely home in Madison, Mississippi, Deborah and Stephen gave her a name with special meaning. Stephen's mother had recently passed away, and her middle name was "Lee." The couple had always loved the name "Lily," so they combined the two and named their daughter "Lillie."

Adjusting to a new culture took time, but Lillie persevered. Then, at age five, she suffered a setback. "I went to pick her up and the teacher said 'Lillie won't get out of her chair and she's refusing to talk,'" recalls Deborah. The worried mom tried to get Lillie to stand, but her legs collapsed, and she couldn't speak.

After rushing to the emergency room, a brain scan revealed a stroke and that Lillie had suffered several undetected strokes before this. She was also diagnosed with Moyamoya, a rare disorder caused by blocked arteries in the part of the brain that regulates motor control.

They performed bypass surgery on the little girl, and she experienced another stroke.

"She lost her ability to walk and talk. She couldn't draw anymore," Deborah recounts tearfully. "Her right side just wouldn't move at all." To top it off, Lillie lost more precious sight, reducing her vision acuity to 20/400.

Despite it all, Lillie has come a long way. She's seven now, and to watch her fearlessly run and cartwheel, giggling all the way, one would never guess what she's been through. "She's the bravest child you'll ever meet," Deborah says.

Determined to give Lillie every tool possible to help her become independent, Deborah reached out to the adoption community and learned about Southeastern Guide Dogs' Kids Companion Dogs. "The companion dog was to help get Lillie ready for having a guide dog someday," explains Deborah.

Then along came Sally, a black goldador full of licks and love. "The connection between Lillie and Sally was very quick," recalls Stephen.

"Sally is the best dog ever. She has made Lillie more independent," Deborah raves. "Lillie has never gone to sleep without Mommy right beside her, until we got Sally. Sally knows Lillie's her person and she just wants ▶







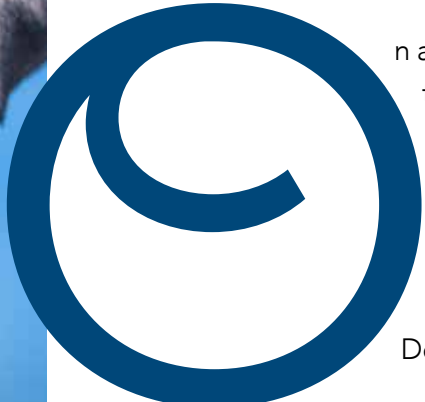
**"Sally is the best dog ever. She has made Lillee more independent."**



Watch a video version of "When Lillee Met Sally" at [GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny](http://GuideDogs.org/DogsofDestiny)



to be there for her." Lillee is too young to walk Sally alone, but she's getting experience for the day when she can get her own guide dog. Her mom says, "It's a true blessing and an unexpected bonus that Sally seems to understand Lillee's special problems and is helping her overcome them."



In a rainy summer afternoon, the kitchen table is littered with markers and colored pencils, while a blank sheet of paper beckons Lillee. She wastes no time, creativity flowing with each colorful scribble. "Lillee loves to draw. I think we go through a ream of paper a week," Deborah chuckles.

While Lillee works on her masterpiece, Sally sits close. "Sally's my best friend," Lillee prattles. "I love that she follows me everywhere." On that note, Lillee hugs Sally and kisses the top of her head. Then Lillee finishes her artwork and promptly shares it with Sally, who approves with the love in her eyes and the wag of her tail. The picture tells it all: there's Lillee and Sally walking together through tall green grass, with a bright yellow sun and big, puffy clouds hovering overhead.



That's Lillee's life with Sally: the little cloud who found her sunshine and a silver lining at the end of a leash. ●

**Lillee has a friend in Sally because we have a friend in you. Thank you for your support!**



## We're proud to support Southeastern Guide Dogs

At Fromm Family Foods, we pride ourselves on offering a wide variety of premium dog and cat foods produced using the finest ingredients. Countless families across the country trust us with feeding their four-legged family members. We are honored to be selected as the Official Dog Food of Southeastern Guide Dogs, providing nutritional excellence to their extraordinary dogs throughout the United States.



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- » Teens with vision loss find new freedom and confidence in our guide dogs.
- » Young children with vision loss find hope in our skilled Kids Companion Dogs.
- » Children who have lost a military parent find comfort in our Gold Star Family Dogs.
- » For every child, there's no better friend than their very own dog!

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•• **THANK YOU, BEST FRIENDS BUDDIES** ••

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The Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation  
 Kristine Blackwell  
 The Johnson Singer Foundation  
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 The Ray Foundation  
 Mary Kay Strangfeld



## The Power of Friendship

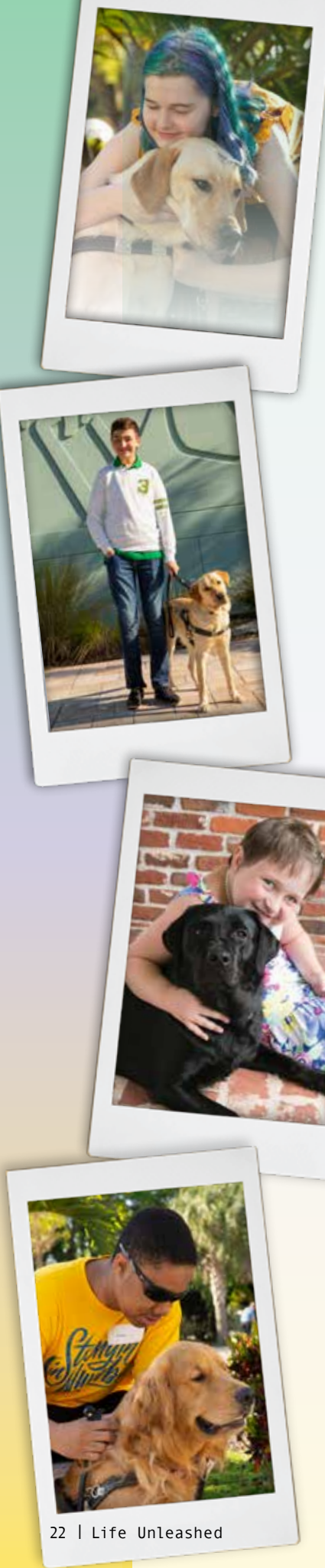
Chuck and Margie Barancik believed that a child's skin color or zip code should not have more influence on their success than the dreams they have in their hearts. It was the expression of this belief—and their family's long belief in the power of philanthropy to shape our world and enrich the lives of all people—that led them to establish the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation.

At Southeastern Guide Dogs, our programs for children and teens would not be where they are today without the generosity and friendship of this caring family, who invested in our youth programs from the very beginning. *Thank you!*



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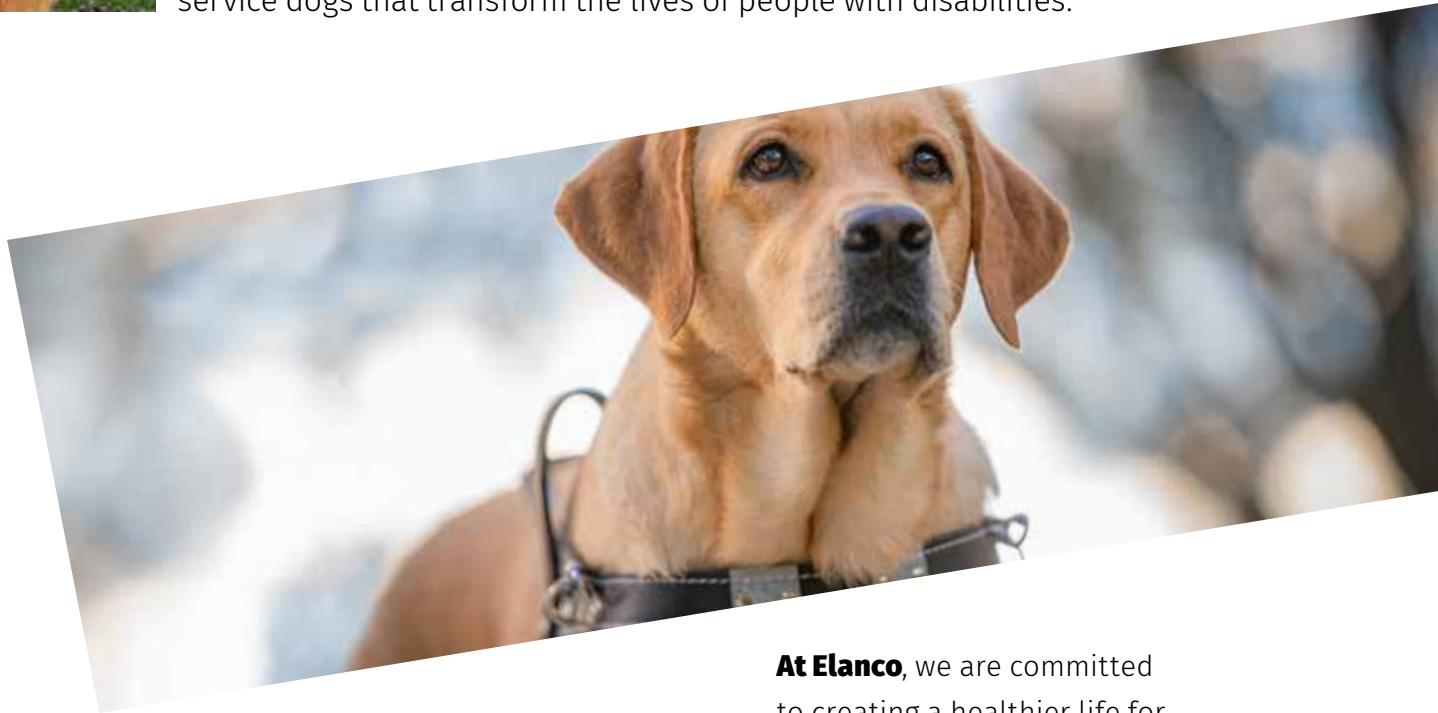






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