



Hope for Heroes

Special Force: Love

A Four-Legged Healer

Forever Family Ties



Scott Finn &
Service Dog Buena

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from our CEO

Dear Friend,

Hope is the beating heart of every issue of *Life Unleashed*, and this one is no different. This edition, with the theme of “Hope for Heroes,” shines a spotlight on the boundless power of hope to lift the spirits and heal the wounds of the brave men and women who have served our nation in the armed forces.



We’ve all faced the weight of difficult times and challenges, but it is in these moments that hope can guide us like a beacon, illuminating the path forward. The inspiring stories in this issue showcase the remarkable journeys of veterans who—thanks to your unwavering support—find hope and purpose once again. Thank you so much for making these stories a reality. I’m grateful.

Warm regards,

Titus Herman

Titus Herman
Chief Executive Officer

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

Life UNLEASHED MAGAZINE

A publication of Southeastern Guide Dogs

Southeastern Guide Dogs creates and nurtures 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](https://www.Guidedogs.org)

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Southeastern GUIDE DOGS

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from our chairman of the board

Dear Supporter,

My wife Missy and I began our journey with the Southeastern Guide Dogs family with the arrival of our first puppy. We have since measured the passage of time through the wagging tails and wet noses of the ten puppies we have had the privilege of raising. Each one has brought us immense joy and a profound sense of purpose.

Now, as board chair, I am honored to be a part of an organization committed to bringing hope to those who need it most. I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of hope on veterans and families facing difficult circumstances through the unconditional support of our dogs, the tireless dedication of our staff and volunteers, and the generosity of donors like you.

I am eternally grateful for your help and friendship. Your ongoing support brings hope and healing to those in need. You make all that we do possible. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Tim Griffy
Board Chair, Southeastern Guide Dogs



Board of Directors

Members of our prestigious Board of Directors are dedicated to governance, strategic planning, financial management, advocacy, and resource development. This group of leaders brings passion and commitment to the organization and plays a pivotal role in our work of providing extraordinary dogs and life-changing services to the people who need them. **Members include:**

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- Bobby Newman** Lifetime Member, Tampa, FL
- Harris Silverman, M.D.** Lifetime Member, Sarasota, FL

Mission Advancement Council

Our dedicated Mission Advancement Council works tirelessly to create and implement our "friendraising" strategy—forming and cultivating relationships with individuals who share our values and vision to secure the long-term success of our organization.

Members include:

- John Whitcomb** Chair, Tampa, FL
- Carol Sanders** Vice Chair, Bradenton, FL
- Eric Prouty** Administrator, Lakewood Ranch, FL
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Emily, Isabella, and Gold Star Family Dog Elle

Family Ties

A special force: love



As a young, single Army officer home after two deployments to Kuwait and Iraq, Captain Emily Birck fell hard for Captain John Tinsley.

John and Emily shared a powerful legacy of service—one passed down for generations. Both graduated from college with Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarships and Army commissions. Their grandfathers served in World War II. John's dad dedicated his career to the Coast Guard, and Emily's brother proudly graduated from West Point.



There's healing power in the love of a good dog.



WITH AN IRRESISTIBLE BOUND OF JOY, ELLE BURST INTO THEIR LIVES AND HEARTS WITH A CALMING, REASSURING PRESENCE.

As they dreamed of a shared future, John applied for the Special Forces program, and Emily knew the Green Beret would fit his personality and drive.

They became a family, adding baby Isabella and a German shepherd pup named Maggie. But just as this vibrant family settled into a new rhythm of life, John deployed overseas again. Emily left the Army, packed up one-year-old Isabella and Maggie, and traveled to Cincinnati to stay with her parents.

And that's when war knocked on their door, the officers and chaplain delivering irrevocable, gut-wrenching news. The love of her life—barely a month in Afghanistan—had been taken from her by an insidious improvised explosive device.

Grief and a good, good girl

As Emily's grief reached its darkest depths, Maggie's unconditional love encircled her and Isabella with nurturing warmth. Their beloved dog brought reassurance and comfort that Emily could scarcely conceive of living without. Isabella only knew a world with Maggie in it, and Emily held on to her dog as an inseparable link to John. She would always be *their* dog, just like Isabella would always be their baby.

Trauma blurs time, but the little family survived, eased along by the Special Operations community who stand with the living in honor of the dead. Isabella grew into a lovely teen who reminded her mom of John. Emily met and married another special operator, Sean Hoey. They



“ELLE IS THE PIECE THAT MAKES OUR FAMILY WHOLE AGAIN.”

started a life together, and the Army moved the family to Germany in 2019. Maggie—now too old to travel—stayed behind with Emily's parents.

The pandemic halted trips back home, so Emily and Isabella would never again hold Maggie in their arms. When she passed away, she took 15 years of boundless love, listening ears, and compassionate loyalty to her final resting place, leaving a gaping new hole in their hearts.

After recently returning to Tampa, they still missed Maggie—yearned for the unconditional love she shared, love that only a dog can give. So, when a friend suggested a Gold Star Family Dog, Emily jumped at the opportunity.

Magical Elle

With an irresistible bound of joy, Elle burst into their lives and hearts with a calming, reassuring presence;

an ever-wagging tail that said “I'm here for you” in the most unmistakable way; and instant snuggles at just the right moments.

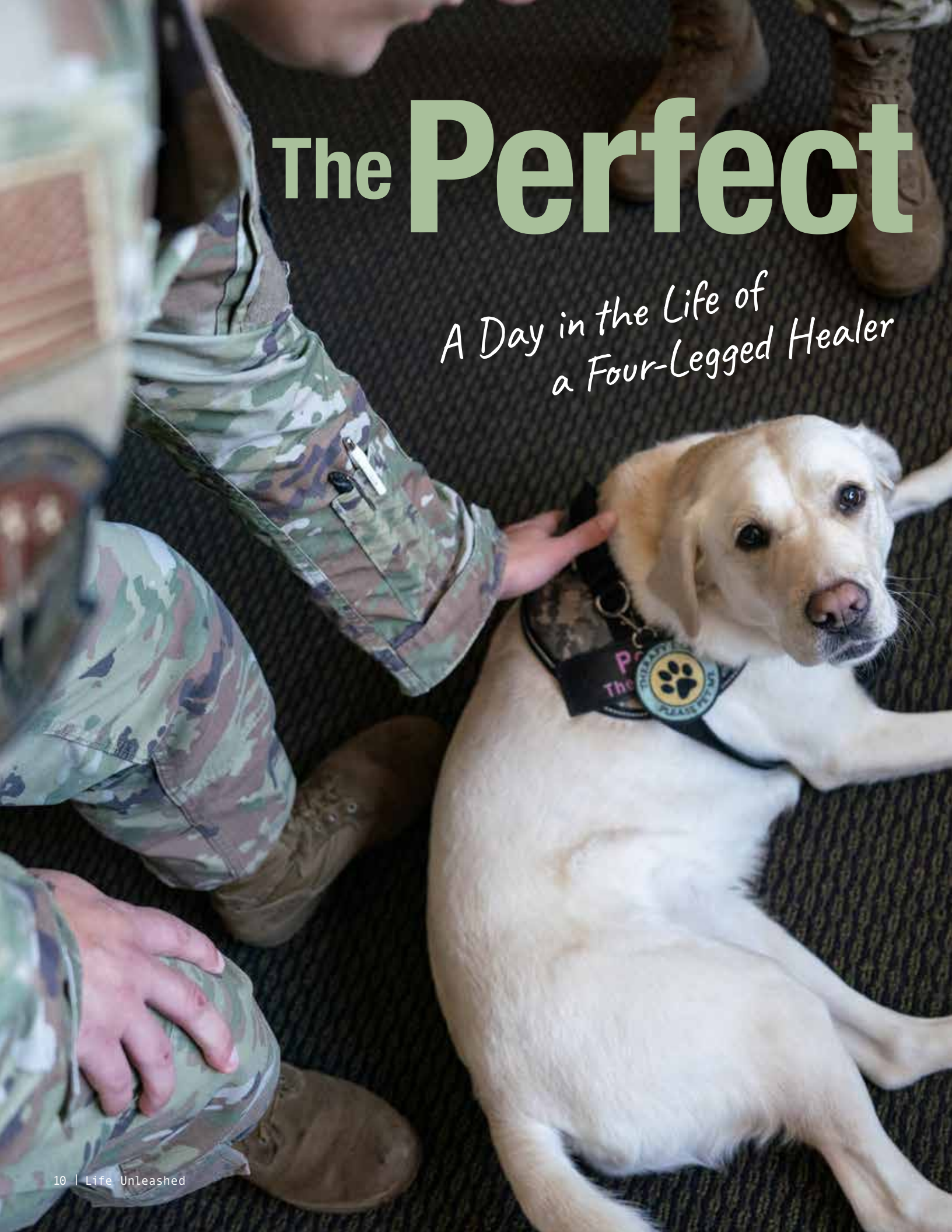
“She's so intuitive, like she knows,” Emily shares. “She reminds me of my Maggie with her soulful eyes. And Isabella is so excited. She's thrilled, like, ‘Oh, it's a dream come true! I have a dog that can snuggle me!’ Honestly, I'm blown away by how amazingly Elle fits into our family. She's the piece that makes our family whole again.”

Elle didn't replace Maggie. She didn't replace John. But her magical “Elle-ness” makes a miracle of a difference. She knows exactly what to do each day to bring love, light, and hope into the lives of her Gold Star family. ■



The Perfect

*A Day in the Life of
a Four-Legged Healer*



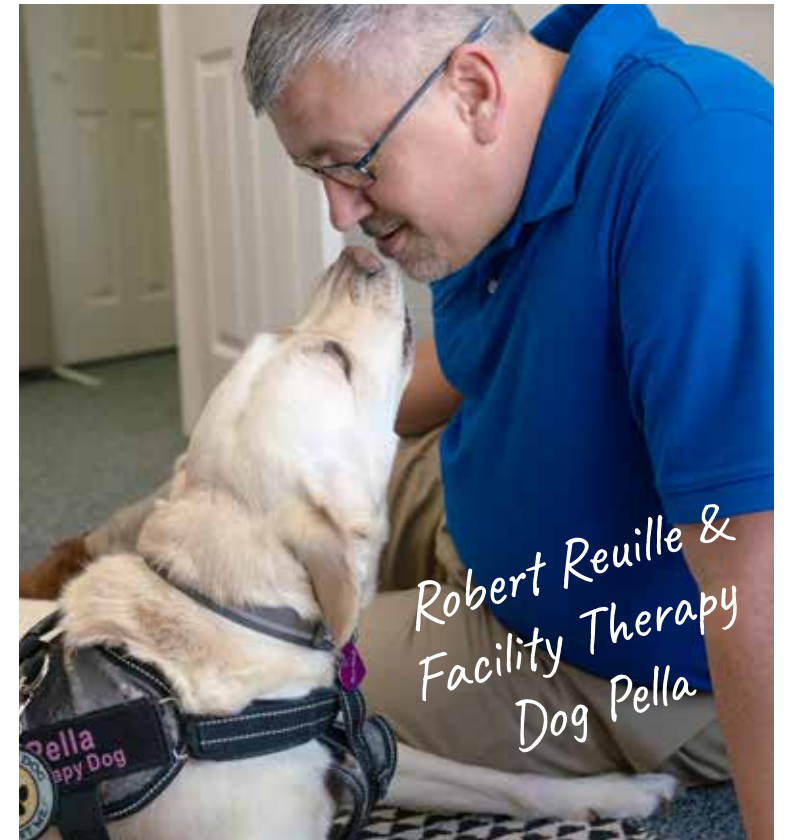
Prescription

Adozen or so veterans greet each other, then take their seats in a circular formation. An affectionate yellow Labrador, her tail wagging softly, makes her way around the group, inviting each participant to pet her on the head. Suddenly, she stops before a man and places her gentle muzzle on his knee. He sighs, snuggles into the dog's silken fur, and smiles. And the healing begins.

What does a facility therapy dog like Pella do? Exactly that—and more—for everyone she meets at Emerald Coast Behavioral Hospital's three clinics in the Florida Panhandle.

Under the astute guidance of her handler, Robert Reuille—a 20-year Air Force veteran who knows firsthand the healing power of canine companionship—Pella brings joy and comfort to everyone around. During her daily rounds, Pella's sweet personality and uncanny sixth sense deliver smiles, healing, and hope.

Robert notes that working in the mental health field is incredibly stressful and exhausting. "It mentally drains you because you see hundreds of people a day, some who may want to take their lives," he says. That's why Pella begins her day by greeting every therapist individually. She delivers instant warmth, affection, and understanding for the staff, instinctively recognizing stress and then gently interacting with those experiencing it.



*Robert Reuille &
Facility Therapy
Dog Pella*



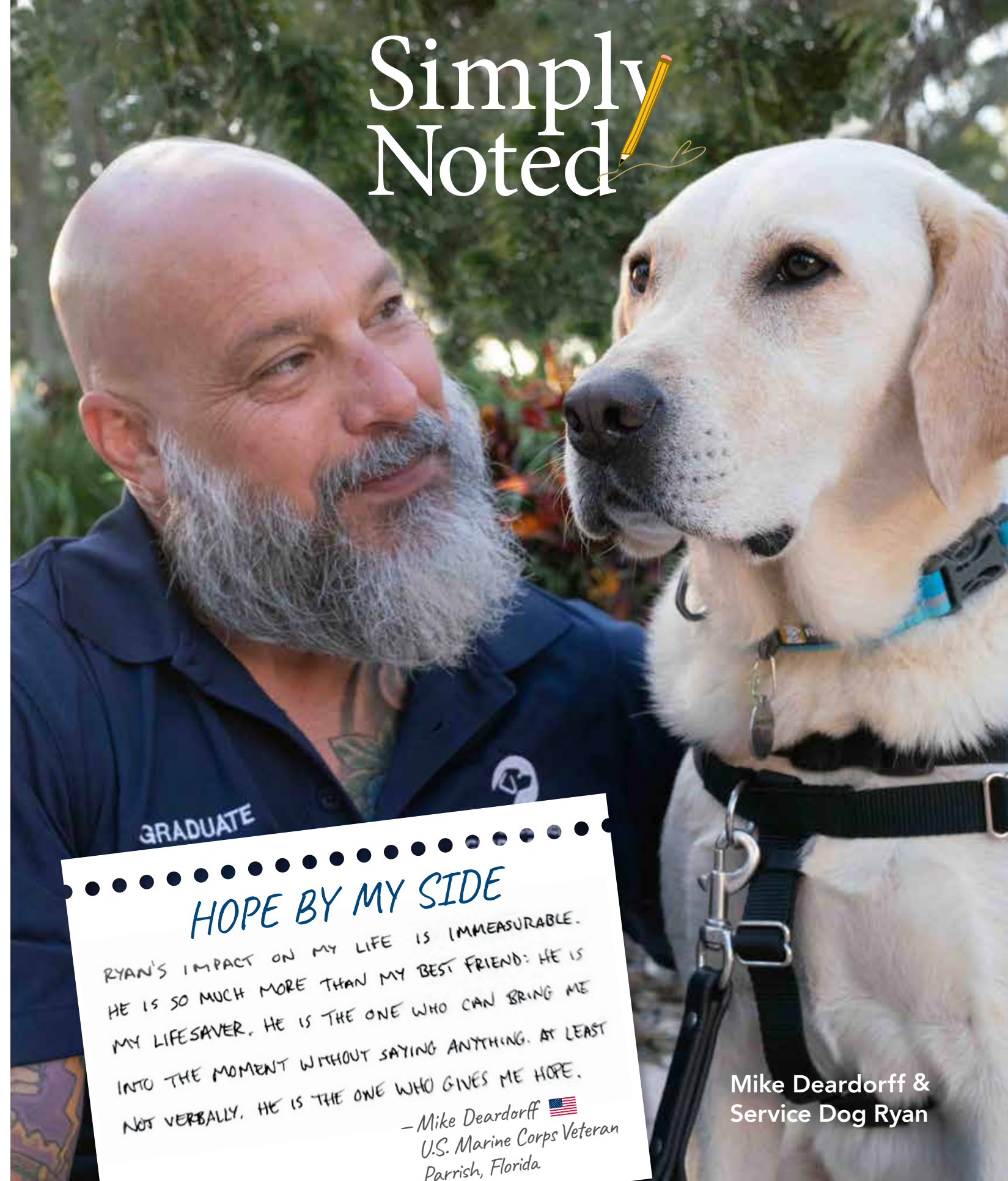


But her impact doesn't stop there. "I could tell probably 50-plus stories of how she's helped patients," Robert shares. "For example, there was one who refused to get out of the car. She was emotionally distraught and would not—could not—calm down. When I took Pella out there, the patient's whole attitude changed. She was able to come into the clinic and receive the help she needed."

Pella's presence quickly calms patients and alerts staff to pay closer attention to those in crisis. "It's really fun to watch her," Robert says. "Sometimes, she'll just put her head on their knee and look at them, which changes their whole demeanor."

Pella's quiet compassion has a tangible, powerful impact on countless veterans and healthcare workers. Radiating an empathetic "I'm here for you and won't judge you" manner even during the most difficult circumstances, she demonstrates why dogs can provide comfort in moments of vulnerability in ways that humans often can't.

Thanks to friends and supporters like you, Pella and 25 other magnificent Southeastern facility therapy dogs currently help thousands of veterans and medical personnel at military hospitals and clinics across the country. Every day, these dogs make a healing difference. ■



Simply Noted



My Day

Date

Today



To Do

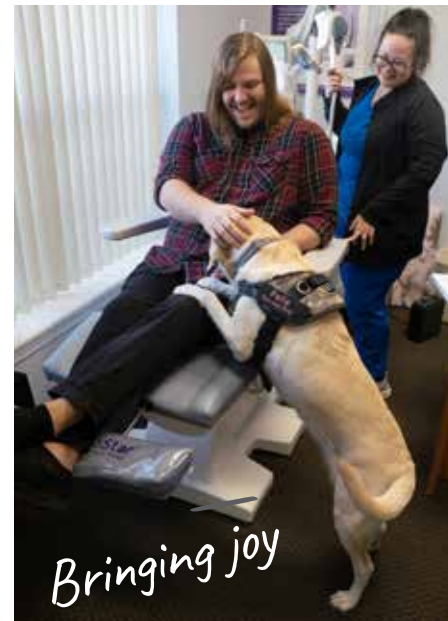
- A.M.** Clinic arrival: staff rounds & check-in
- 9:00 Group session—veterans facing PTSD
 - 10:00 Break, informal staff check-in
 - 11:00 Group session: stress management—active-duty members
- P.M.** Staff lunch and relaxation
- 1:00 Group therapy session—substance abuse
 - 2:00 Casual rounds, staff check-in
 - 3:00 Group session—adolescent children of service members
 - 4:00 Quick nap while Robert completes his workday
 - 5:00 Head home with Robert to my pet life with the family

Goals

- Calm anxious hearts
- Help them smile
- Offer a paw for comfort
- Be there when needed
- Get lots of belly rubs



Water



HOPE BY MY SIDE

RYAN'S IMPACT ON MY LIFE IS IMMEASURABLE. HE IS SO MUCH MORE THAN MY BEST FRIEND: HE IS MY LIFESAVER. HE IS THE ONE WHO CAN BRING ME INTO THE MOMENT WITHOUT SAYING ANYTHING. AT LEAST NOT VERBALLY. HE IS THE ONE WHO GIVES ME HOPE.

—Mike Deardorff U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Parrish, Florida

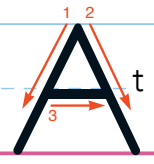
Mike Deardorff & Service Dog Ryan



S L O W D O W N You're On Buena Time!

SCOTT FINN AND SERVICE DOG BUENA

The Marines taught him to be ready. His dog taught him to relax.



At 19, Scott Finn struggled in college. Unsure of his purpose, he felt bad “wasting” his dad’s tuition money when two younger siblings would soon need it.

“I realized—I’ve got to do something on my own, so I went to a recruiter,” he says. “I’d heard the Marine Corps was tough, so why not?”

Scott served five years, spending two tours in Iraq, where every convoy became a potential enemy target. He never let down his guard, constantly scanning his surroundings for threats. But despite the danger, Scott thrived under the Marine’s strict structure, tight-knit camaraderie, and “get-it-done” mentality.

Generosity can live forever.

Nola Timmins & Guide Dog Brizzy



HERITAGE SOCIETY

Join our Heritage Society by including Southeastern Guide Dogs in your will, and leave a legacy that lasts.



Learn more at [GuideDogs.org/HS](https://www.GuideDogs.org/HS)

Scott Finn: Southern Oak's Teacher of the Year!



Scott and Buena in their classroom

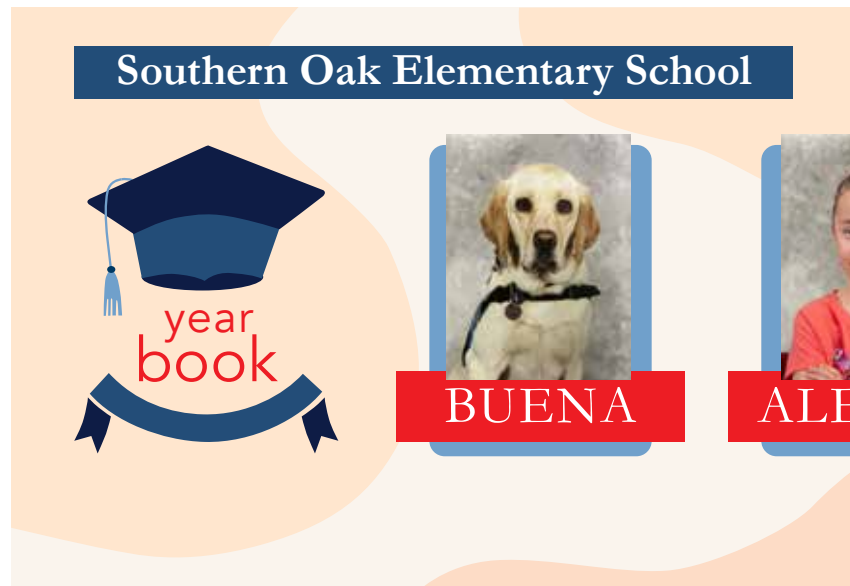
But when he left the Marines, the Marines never left him. Scott returned to college, earned a degree in education, and became a fifth-grade math and science teacher—yet

struggled to adapt to civilian life. His inner war zone trapped him in constant, adrenaline-fueled high alert.

Doctors diagnosed Scott with post-traumatic stress disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder, which propelled his exceptional performance in the classroom—but not without a cost. After school, Scott only wanted to stay home. Crowds and family functions triggered even more stress.

His wife, Courtney, suggested a service dog. He applied, and soon afterward, the calming, belly-rub-loving Buena joined the Finn family and changed everything. This mellow pup has taught Scott to live on Buena-time.

Buena is more than just a service dog to Scott. She is a constant companion and best friend with an extraordinary ability to sense when he feels overwhelmed. She helps him relax and



Buena is included in the school's yearbook.



Courtney and Scott Finn with Buena and Abby

eases him into social situations where he and Courtney connect with friends and family.

"People say, 'Oh my god, look at the way she looks at you,'" Scott says. "And I feel the joy she gives me just by looking at me."

Courtney sees a big difference, too. "Buena comforts him," she says. "She puts her chin or paw on his knee or jumps on his lap to hug him—like, 'Hey, you're having a moment, even when you don't realize it.'" Scott's constantly on the go, and Buena's like, 'Whoa, take a minute, breathe, walk slower.'"

Buena loves school, where the fifth graders treat her and their favorite teacher with admiration, love, and respect—cheering them on with Scott's new title: **Southern Oak Elementary School Teacher of the Year.**

During his deployment, Scott became a hero for our country—and now, he's a hero for the next generation. **A+**, Scott and Buena! ■

"Scott's constantly on the go, and Buena's like, 'Whoa, take a minute, breathe, walk slower.'"

—Courtney Finn




Simply Noted



MY EVERYDAY HERO

Sadie has been a huge benefit to my everyday life. Having that friend that is always by my side through all of the ups and downs that life challenges me with. She is not only my service dog but a member of my family.

- Travis Johnson 
 U.S. Army Veteran
 Wallingford, Connecticut

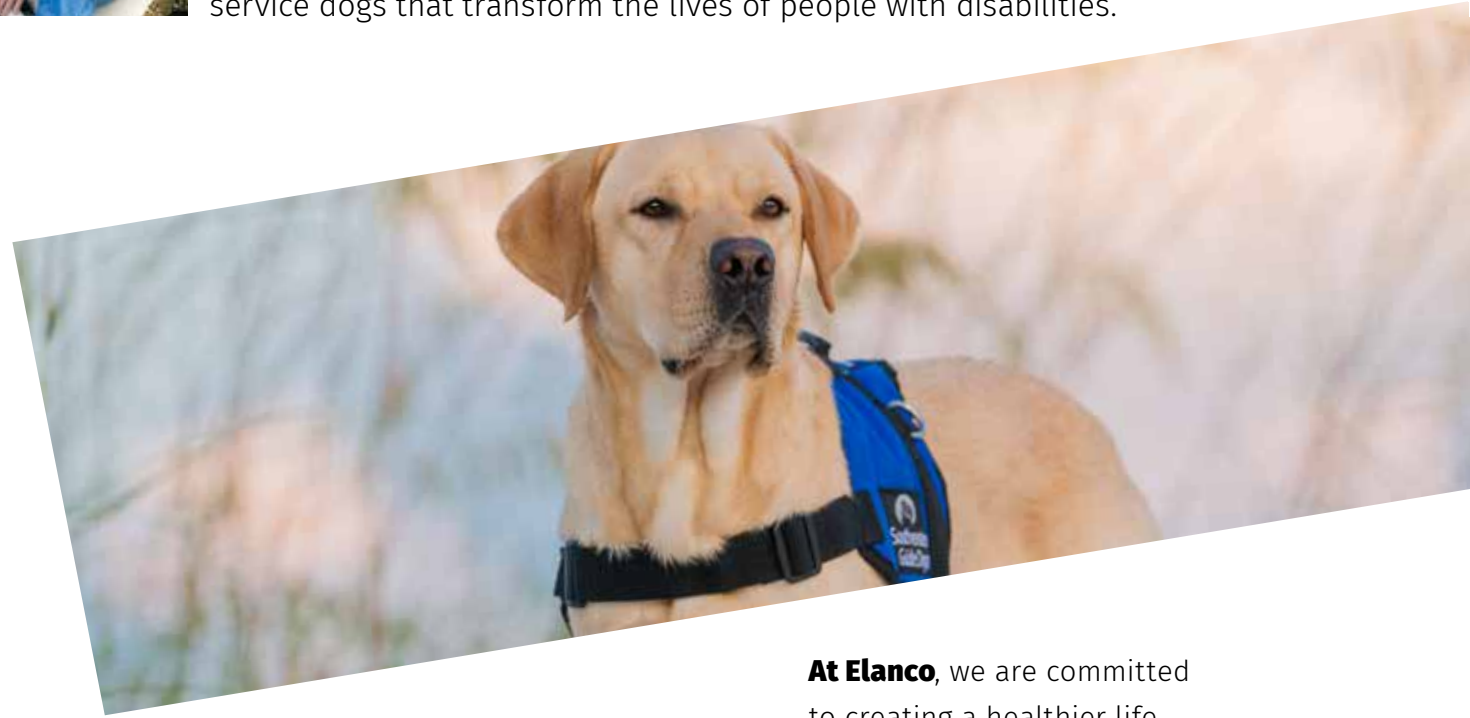
Travis Johnson & Service Dog Sadie



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Help Us Meet the \$600,000 **Heroes Challenge**

Their Dedication, Discipline, and Devotion—

DOUBLED



WHAT IS A HERO?

Someone who makes a positive impact on the world, often at great personal risk or sacrifice.

A hero inspires others and serves as a role model for what it means to be brave, compassionate, and selfless. A hero is not just someone who fights for what is right, but someone who lives with a steadfast dedication, unwavering discipline, and strong devotion to a cause greater than themselves.

But sometimes even a hero needs a little help. That's why we created the **Heroes Challenge**, a transformative **\$600,000 matching campaign** to support veterans and their families who need our extraordinary dogs.

★ During the Heroes Challenge, your donation will go twice as far in supporting the pups and programs that help heroes who have sacrificed so much. **Every dollar you give is instantly matched up to \$600,000.** Please donate today and join us in showing our veterans and their families they are not alone.

THE HEROES COUNCIL Special appreciation goes to our Heroes Council, a group of friends who care about veterans and have pooled their resources to create our **\$600,000 Heroes Challenge**. Because of their helpful compassion, your gift will go twice as far.

★ **Heroes Council Chairman:** Vice Admiral Joe Maguire, USN (Ret.)

HEROES COUNCIL MEMBERS

Jim Barge & Dawn McKnight

Carol & Ed Sanders

The Coopersmith Family Foundation

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ONLINE

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4210 77th Street East
Palmetto, FL 34221

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Do you have a donor-advised fund? Now is the perfect time to put those philanthropic dollars to work on behalf of our extraordinary dogs, transforming lives throughout the country. Visit [GuideDogs.org/daf](https://www.guidedogs.org/daf)

We're grateful for your caring and kindness

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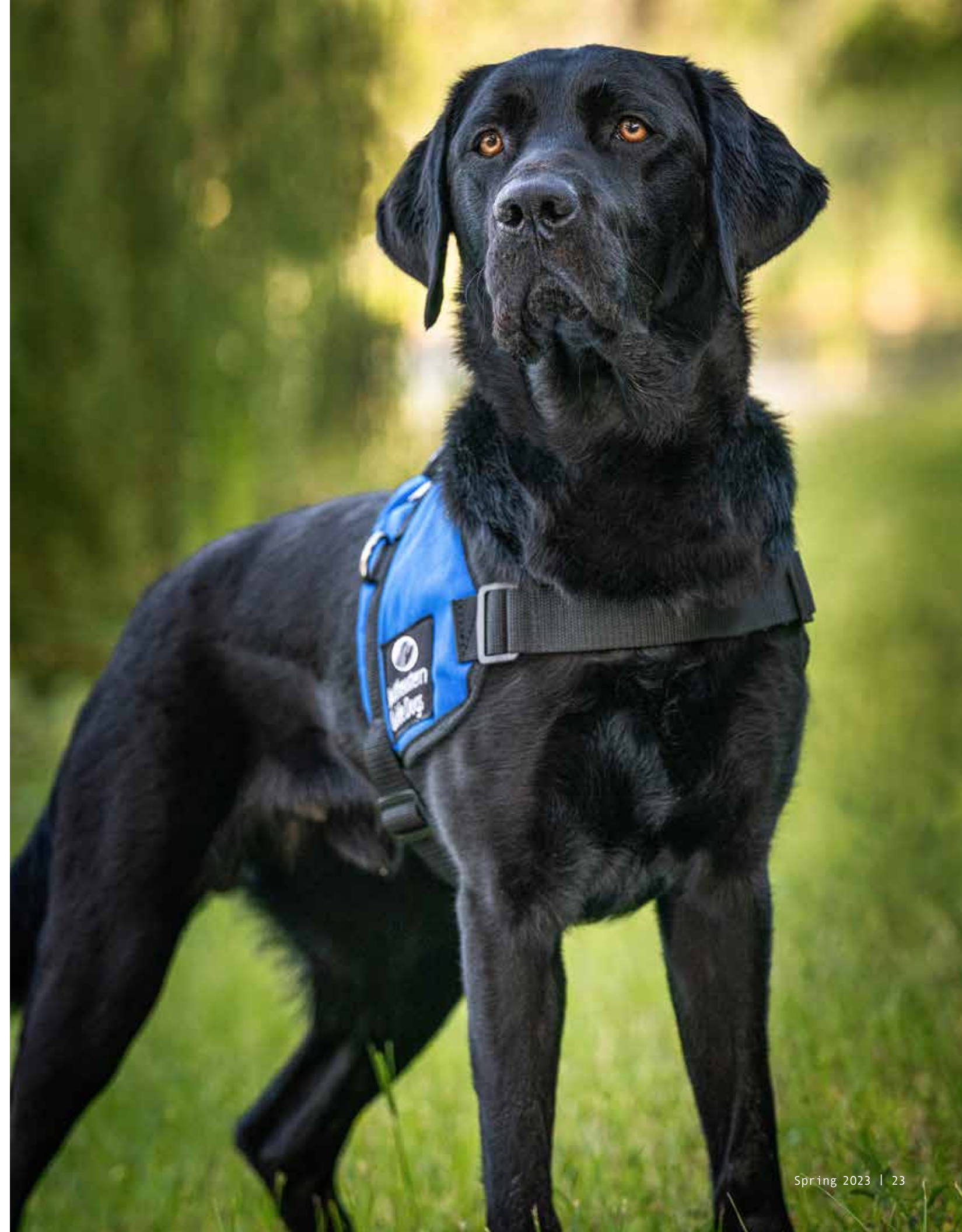
IRA DISTRIBUTION

You look for ways to give—and give smart. You can make your tax-free, qualified charitable distribution while supporting our mission. Visit our website at [GuideDogs.org/IRA](https://www.guidedogs.org/IRA) Or, contact Gloria Manzenberger, VP Finance & Risk Management at Gloria.Manzenberger@guidedogs.org or 941-845-1870.

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You keep your pulse on the market, while qualifying for an income tax charitable deduction and avoiding paying taxes on appreciated value. Get started by contacting Gloria Manzenberger at Gloria.Manzenberger@guidedogs.org or 941-845-1870.

Thank you for your generosity!





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