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ALERT DOGS BRING
COMPANIONSHIP AND
PEACE OF MIND FOR
DIABETICS.



When Eva Leersnyder was diagnosed with Type I diabetes at 6 years old, her mother Lynn worried constantly about her daughter having a hypoglycaemic episode. For parents of diabetic children, the responsibility can be overwhelming.

Keeping their kids safe and healthy is a 24-7 job. A sudden drop in blood sugar can cause weakness and fatigue, as well as sweating and blurred vision. Left unchecked, seizures may occur. After that, the diabetic could slip into a life-threatening coma.

Last year, that all changed when the

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY DIABETIC ALERT DOGS



EVA AND MELODY

family and their 3-year old golden retriever, Melody, began a 10-week training program that taught Melody to alert Eva of any sudden drop in blood sugar.

The program called Diabetic Alert Dogs: The Borderland Way was developed by Ann Walling, owner of Borderland Farms in Franklin, TN, along with veteran trainers Melanie Del Villaggio and Patty Wood of Memphis Tennessee.

Walling knows firsthand how frightening it is to care for a child who is diabetic. Her own son, now 46, also has Type I diabetes.

Diabetic Alert Dogs: The Borderland Way, now in its second year, has its roots in a training model established in England and is unique in that it allows diabetics to train dogs they already own rather than paying the high price for a pre-trained dog that can cost tens of thousands of dollars. Borderland charges just \$200 for 10 classes.

Borderland works with owners to train their dogs to identify and alert them during both hypoglycaemic and hyperglycaemic episodes by detecting a distinctive scent found in the skin, sweat, saliva and breath.

“All dogs noses are superior to human beings,” says Walling in an exclusive feature to *Woof! magazine*. “Human noses having only about six million sensory receptor sites, while some dogs have up to 300 million.”

Before entering the program, dogs must be crate-trained and have obtained

their AKC Canine Good Citizen certificate. “These prerequisites are important since we train in a variety of settings to mimic situations the dogs will face where they will need to alert”, says Walling. “An episode can occur anywhere - restaurants, in a moving car, in crowds of people. And they can occur at anytime - even in the middle of the night.”

Once the dog has met these basic requirements, training can begin. First, owners imprint their dogs to the scent by exposing them to scent samples. These are collected by the owner when their blood sugar is low (or high) - most commonly obtained by placing a simple cotton roll used by dentists into the mouth and collecting saliva samples.

After the dog has learned to recognise the scent, it then is time to train the alert. Most dogs alert naturally with some type of response - pawing, nudging, barking, etc. Game playing and tons of positive reinforcement help the dogs to grow stronger in their ability to alert.

After the dogs have strengthened their alerting ability, they are then taken into the real world filled with distractions - shopping malls teeming with people, restaurants filled with wonderful aromas, and in a car during heavy traffic just to name a few.

Night Alerts tend to be the most difficult for dogs to learn. Consistent training over a period of time for night alerts will help the dog develop reliability and consistency both day and night. Ten weeks is only a beginning. A reliably trained DAD requires about 2 years of

training.

“Training doesn’t stop after the 10-week program,” says Walling. “It is important to reinforce continually what the dog has learned long after the completing the program.”

For Eva, who has signed up for the program for the second time for advanced training, spending time with Melody and playing scent games is not a chore, but a great way to bond with the dog she loves. For Eva’s parents, the extra help monitoring her blood sugar

levels have given them an added sense that they are doing everything possible to ensure the safety of their child.

Today, Diabetic Alert Dogs: The Borderland Way operates programs in three cities—Franklin, TN, Memphis, TN and Birmingham AL. Moreover, they offer their training manual and their expertise to dog owners and trainers, not only in the U.S., but across the globe as well. 🐾

Visit them at: www.diabeticalertdogs-borderland.com



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