



man's BEST friend

Wildrose Kennels Trains Life-Saving Dogs

Story by MADISON HILL

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They say that a dog is a man's best friend. Nothing could be truer at Wildrose Kennels, with its national headquarters in Oxford, Mississippi. Wildrose is world renowned for breeding and training British Labradors as obedient Gundogs and able outdoor companions. In recent years, however, Wildrose has taken on a new program in addition to their wildly successful Gundog and adventure dog programs. This new program is the smallest and most exclusive, and arguably the most important program offered at Wildrose. Wildrose Kennels has begun to train diabetic alert dogs.

Wildrose Kennels was founded in 1972, and Mike Stewart became the owner in 1999. He had been training dogs since he was 14 years old as a hobby and is now Wildrose's President with his wife, Cathy, as the Vice President and Sales and Business Manager. The organization's national headquarters are located in Oxford, Mississippi and there are facilities in Jasper, Arkansas and Granite, Colorado for summertime training. Wildrose is known for its two popular dog-training programs, the Gentleman's Gundog program and the Adventure Dog program. The Gentleman's Gundog program aims to produce dogs that are reliable hunting companions.

"We train the dogs in a positive way to be destination wing shooting companions," says Stewart. "These are not competition dogs. They have to travel well and do well in hotels. We call them dogs in duality — they have to do multiple tasks. For instance, they may do ducks in the morning and quail in the afternoon." The Adventure Dog program produces Labradors that are able to accompany their owners on any outdoor trek. "The adventure dog is a hiking, biking, dog of the trails," says Stewart.

"There are 14 different skill sets they can be certified in to become a master trekker. These are specifically dogs that are prepared to go anywhere. They're outdoor companions that would equate to a Land Rover."

The third and smallest program available at Wildrose Kennels is the Diabetic Alert Dogs Foundation, which is housed with the non-profit Create Foundation in Tupelo, Mississippi. Because Stewart wants the program to be successful for each diabetic person they help, it is kept small, with only six to eight diabetic alert dogs trained each year. "It's a good way for us to contribute and give back because our world's been good to us," says Stewart. "We still only produce just a few of them but I will sell puppies that are scent imprinted — they have been introduced to the scent. Six to eight a year is all we're going to do."

The Diabetic Alert Dogs (also known as "DADs") from Wildrose Kennels are only trained to work with people affected by Type 1 diabetes. Type 1 diabetes causes the body to stop producing insulin, causing blood sugar levels to swing. People with Type 1 diabetes have to prick their fingers to test their blood sugar and inject themselves with insulin multiple times a day in order to stay alive. Despite constant checking and injecting, these life-threatening blood sugar swings can happen unexpectedly.

"Our focus is to train DADs for T1 diabetics. Wildrose Service Companions is limited in the number of quality dogs we can produce, so we limit our application process to Type 1 diabetics. Some are unable to sense the typical indicators of blood sugar changes. A well-trained





Molly Harris participates in a training session during the 2013 Wildrose DAD Conference.

DAD can warn them, sometimes 15 or 20 minutes ahead of their blood sugar meter. The dog becomes a proactive tool to assist with better control of blood sugar levels. We believe this improves both the quality and quantity of their life."

Because of their notable scenting abilities, dogs are able to detect and distinguish the different odors produced by low, normal and high blood sugar levels, and can be trained to alert their owners with different signals for each so that the owner can take steps to prevent blood sugar swings. British Labradors are used because they are smaller in size, which makes them easier to take anywhere, and they have good temperament. At Wildrose, puppies are introduced to these odors at as young as three days old so that it will be easier for them to recognize the scent and be able to alert to it when they are older.

The program was started in the spring of 2007 when Rachel Thornton, the woman who is now the associate trainer of the Diabetic Alert Dogs at Wildrose, approached Stewart about helping her train her diabetic alert dog for her daughter, Abi. The stay-at-home mother of seven said that after Abi was diagnosed when she was 11 years old, she was doing research to find something that would help her daughter when

she came across diabetic alert dogs. Thornton, who now has seven grandchildren, is eager to share about what is now her profession and one of her great passions: training diabetic alert dogs with Wildrose for people who are going through what her family went through.

"I began to do a lot of research about Type 1 diabetes and if there was some kind of device that could let me know when my daughter needed help," says Thornton. "We were checking her blood sugar every two hours all day long and multiple times during the night, too, but what we needed was a device that would let us know when she wasn't symptomatic but the body was under stress."

After being taken advantage of by a fraudulent diabetic alert dog facility, Thornton bought a seven week-old Labrador, who ended up being of Wildrose lineage, and she and her daughter began to train him themselves. "The service dog industry is dangerous because there is no regulation," says Thornton. "No certification or credentials are required for the trainer or the dog. So for desperate parents that creates a very dangerous situation. When we're ready to get something for our child and we're ready to believe that the product you have for us is actually workable, there's a lot of

room for people to be taken advantage of."

Since Mr. Darcy is of Wildrose progeny, Thornton contacted Wildrose Kennels' Mike Stewart with questions concerning on-going obedience training, thus beginning the Diabetic Alert Dogs program at Wildrose with Mr. Darcy as the first Wildrose DAD. Motivated by the needs of her daughter, Thornton became dedicated to validating her training by studying with well-known leaders in canine scent-discrimination and canine behavior.

"When (Mike Stewart) was finished helping us he said, 'What else can I do?' and I said, 'There's more people like me. Let's help them,'" says Thornton. "So we designed and hosted our first diabetic alert dog workshop."

Today, the DADs are trained in obedience, public access and scent. Wildrose Kennels also holds DAD workshops that teach people how Wildrose trains their diabetic alert dogs, and helps them continue the life-long process of training with current and future DAD teams. Since the program began, Wildrose has trained six to eight dogs each year for diabetics. Applications are currently unavailable because the demand is so high and Wildrose wants to maintain quality in their program by keeping the program small and one-on-one

intensive. Thornton conducts portions of the training from her home in Hamilton, Alabama, traveling regularly to the Wildrose site in Oxford, Mississippi, or to clients' homes. Thornton says that everywhere she goes, a service dog goes; they are always in training.

"Wildrose Kennels is a very selective breeder of the finest British Labs," says Thornton. "We know our line because we only train our own dogs. So when someone purchases a puppy from Wildrose and they want training when it's six or eight months old, the dog comes back to Wildrose Kennels."

The process of getting a DAD from Wildrose is not easy. There is an extensive application process, in-person interviews and then the family has to be matched to the right dog. The families are also encouraged to attend Wildrose DAD workshops and make trips to Wildrose to demonstrate their commitment. Anyone can apply to get a Wildrose DAD at any age, but Stewart says that the diabetic alert dogs work best for people who have a steady lifestyle. "Rachel primarily decides if this dog is right for this person," says Stewart. "Each family is different and you have to try to match the right dog to the right person. That's why you don't just pick up the paper and buy a diabetic alert dog. It's a huge, long process — it's a huge commitment."

One family who is currently in the process of getting a Wildrose DAD is the Harris family. The family of five (with one on the way) is from Hernando, Mississippi. Their oldest daughter, Molly, who is 11 years old, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in December. Molly, the straight-A student and all-star softball player found out she had Type 1 diabetes when she suddenly lost 21 pounds last year. However she is not willing to let her life be controlled by diabetes. "Molly is still playing softball," says Robby Harris, Molly's father. "We actually were going to sit out this year. We decided it might be best just to figure out what was going on. After about a month passed, she wasn't having it. She said, 'I want to play softball.' During a softball game, she may check her blood sugar two or three times an inning. She always checks before she goes to the field. She always checks before she bats."

Since December when their daughter was diagnosed, the Harris parents have lost sleep. If Molly's blood sugar goes

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too high during the night she could go into a diabetic coma, and if it gets too low she could lose consciousness and never wake up. "For the most part, I know this dog is going to help my family with most of it so my mom won't be up all night worried about me," said Molly.



The Wildrose Diabetic Alert Dogs came up in their research when the family was trying to learn more about the disease that changed their lives so suddenly. As her dad described her, Molly is a child who does not ask for much and is always willing to share. A diabetic alert dog however is not a dog to share--diabetic alert dogs are working service dogs and they are meant to stay focused and avoid distraction from people besides their owners. "I'll have to tell my friends that they're not going to be able to mess with it and I've never really been like that," said Molly. "I'll have to learn to do that and everything."

The family is in the process of raising funds to pay for the dog and being matched with the right dog for their family. In

an effort to pay for the dog that costs approximately \$14,000 the family has sold T-shirts and bracelets, and they have the support of their community. They are attending Wildrose DAD workshops and learning as much as they can in preparation for the commitment they are about to make.

"I think it's going to help us in ways that only the parents of a diabetic child can understand," says Robby. "I think it will warn us early, but at the same time, I think we're taking on a large responsibility. I also think that Molly will be taking on a large responsibility. This dog will be by her side 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Angie Simonton, a single mom from Texas, got her daughter, Lily, a Wildrose Diabetic Alert Dog almost two years ago. Lily was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when she was 18 months old and has had the disease for five years. She is Hypoglycemic Unaware, which means that she is unable to feel the warning signs of a blood sugar low. Angie says that this is very dangerous because it can lead to seizures and death. "I am a single, working mom and I don't have another parent in the home that can assist with Lily's diabetic care," says Angie. "For us, I needed another set of eyes, or in this case, a nose." Having a Wildrose Diabetic Alert Dog has greatly impacted Angie and Lily's lives, making it possible for Lily to go to preschool safely while Angie is at work. "I can't say enough wonderful things about these life-saving dogs or Wildrose, for they have greatly impacted our life and saved her life more times than I can count," says Angie. Charlie is dedicated to Lily, just as all Wildrose DADs learn to be dedicated to their owners. This iron bond represents a commitment of the owner to take care of the dog and vice versa. "I am pleased to

say that our bond with Charlie is definitely strong," says Angie. "He is with us everywhere we go and is always by Lily's side. She loves him and depends on his life-saving alerts. She knows his importance. She knows what role he plays in her diabetic management and how he is truly the angel by her side."

"We have never, ever turned down a client when they didn't have enough money," says Thornton. "We have a lot of support. We can direct people to other nonprofit organizations to help them raise money or to scholarship them. We do fundraising to help our own clients. Every year, we sell calendars and that money goes to support families that we currently have in progress." If a family is able to make the commitment and can successfully handle the responsibility of having a Diabetic Alert Dog, the outcome can be life changing. Wildrose is committed to training dogs to fit the needs of people, whether that be hunting, hiking or detecting blood sugar swings. Having a diabetic alert dog could make it possible for a diabetic person to get a good night's sleep, or to be able to go to school, or to gain the independence they need to follow their aspirations.

More information on the Wildrose Kennels and their programs can be found on their website at uklabs.com or at diabeticalertdog.com. Donations to the Wildrose Diabetic Alert Dogs Foundation can be made at createfoundation.com, which will support the Diabetic Alert Dogs program along with the research, education, training and information distribution about Diabetic Alert Dogs. The Create Foundation was founded by George McLean and has been doing philanthropic work with donors, communities and nonprofit organizations for over 40 years.



Rachel Thorton, Wildrose's DAD Program Director, during the 2013 Wildrose DAD Conference.