



Ali, Jaxx, & Olive:

A BEACON OF HOPE IN AUTISM PARENTHOOD

OUR MISSING PUZZLE PIECE

In May of 2023, my son Jaxx and I welcomed our Autism service dog, Olive, into our lives. The transformation has been amazing, and I can't stress enough how much she has changed our lives. Olive is his guardian angel, constantly vigilant and attentive to his every need—she's incredible.

LIFE BEFORE OLIVE

When Jaxx was born, I didn't know much about raising a baby, let alone a child with Autism. As an infant, there were subtle signs of Autism, but they were easy to mistake for normal baby cuteness. Things like flapping his face turned out to be a symptom called stemming—repetitive movements or sounds. It wasn't until Jaxx was about two years old when he started having seizures, and I knew something more serious was going on.

When the specialist confirmed his diagnosis, it hit me hard. I cried... a lot. I grappled with the weight of being a single mom, worried about how I'd afford the support he deserved. Yet, in the same breath, I rallied myself with the mantra, "I've tackled bigger hurdles before; we'll conquer this one too!"

Having a child with Autism required me to adapt almost every part of my life. Jaxx has a habit of eloping, a typical behavior among children with Autism where they get the spontaneous urge to wander off. It's not his fault; he just gets confused impulses. Living near a river, I constantly feared Jaxx escaping out the front door. So, I got creative. I mastered the art of taking a super-fast shower. Two hours of sleep became the new norm. I installed an alarm system and raised the door locks to ensure he couldn't reach them, and even bought a bunkbed so I could monitor him at

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Greetings,

With each service dog we place, our mission grows stronger. These amazing dogs don't just change lives; they transform them. Working together, our dogs and their handlers extend this positivity to others, creating a ripple effect in our community.

Having experienced the healing of a service dog, our veterans become passionate advocates and resources for other veterans in need. Parents of children with Autism, who often feel isolated in their journey, become beacons of hope, sharing with others the power of service dogs for children with Autism. Our guide dog teams become champions and leaders in accessibility, paving the way for a more inclusive society for people with visual impairments. And by providing crucial support and comfort in schools, hospitals, courtrooms, and police/fire departments, our facility dog teams are revolutionizing how we address mental health challenges.

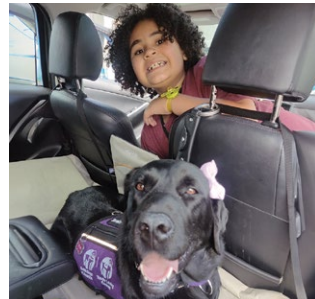
We have a goal this year to graduate 60 service dog teams. That means 60 lives will be forever changed and go on to make an incredible impact on the world. Thank you for always supporting us. With your help, we can keep helping those who need it most.

Sincerely,

Russell Gittlen

Russell Gittlen, President
GDA|TLC





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night. Going out in public was an ordeal that required multiple days of planning, and a couple prayers to be successful. Even then, anything could trigger Jaxx, forcing us to leave immediately.

NEWFOUND HOPE

In the fall of 2022, I had to travel to Las Vegas for a work conference. I planned on going solo until a sudden tragedy forced me to bring Jaxx along with a sitter. He was having a hard week; Vegas isn't an ideal place for a child with Autism.

That was until I crossed paths with Guide Dogs of America | Tender Loving Canines. They had a booth at the conference, so I brought Jaxx down to meet the dogs and test his reaction. The large crowd of people and loud noises immediately overwhelmed Jaxx, so I took him to a distant chair to calm down. Seeing Jaxx in distress, GDA | TLC President Russ Gittlen sent a trainer with a dog over to comfort him.

That encounter changed everything. Jaxx's mood immediately switched when the service dog, Bobby, licked him on the hand. The trainer cued Bobby to lay on my son's lap, and the next thing I knew, Jaxx was smiling and laughing, rolling on the floor with the dog. I was in tears – I couldn't believe it. I didn't think there would ever be something that could snap him out of a meltdown that quickly. With the help of Bobby that week, Jaxx went swimming, explored the hotel, and tried many new things without a major meltdown. This was a whole new world for us!

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Meeting GDA|TLC gave us hope at a time when we desperately needed it. The most challenging part of life

before Olive was, without-a-doubt, Jaxx's meltdowns. In overwhelming situations, he struggles to regulate his emotions, which often results in yelling and screaming so hard that he passes out. At worst, they can cause a seizure.

Every time Jaxx would have a seizure or meltdown, he would regress in his development, forcing us to relearn everything. I say "us" because, like most kids with Autism, Jaxx struggles with communication, so I play an active role in teaching him to speak. This cycle took a toll on both of us. It's heart-wrenching to watch your child struggle, and Jaxx felt disappointed too because he understood he lost a skill he once had. This frustration would then lead to more meltdowns, creating a hopeless cycle of devastation and disappointment that seemed impossible to break.

Olive broke the cycle. This little service dog intuitively senses Jaxx's discomfort and offers him support with her gentle presence. Gone are the days of carefully planning outings to avoid meltdowns. Jaxx is ready to go anywhere and do anything as long as Olive is by his side. Because of this, Jaxx's communication skills have significantly improved. While he used to mimic others and sing songs to communicate, he's now genuinely responding when people talk to him. He loves telling people about his Olive! He's confident in this adorable little dog and is trying to show her that he's working just as hard as she does for him.

Not only is she helping prevent Jaxx from seizures, but she is a fantastic study buddy. **Thanks to Olive, he's reading at a kindergarten level and can even write his name, letters, and numbers.** During their reading sessions, Olive keeps Jaxx engaged and focused by holding the book with her paw while he directs her to turn the pages with her nose.

Olive isn't just a gift to Jaxx's life; she's a blessing to mine. **I can finally take a regular shower like a regular human being.** I owe this girl the world because I love to unwind by soaking in a bubble bath after a stressful day at work. Olive has Jaxx's back and watches his every move. I can place her by the door while I'm getting ready, and she won't move, standing guard.

I'm sleeping at night for the first time in years. Because of his Autism, Jaxx can go days without a proper night's sleep. Instead of waking me up when he is having trouble, he wakes Olive, allowing me to get my much-needed rest. I no longer have to sleep in his room; Olive is his new bunk buddy. Whenever he gets the urge to elope, he takes her out to read and play.

Most of all, for the first time in my life I can see a future for my son. When I used to think about life for Jaxx, I was always filled with concern. After witnessing so much change in the eight months he's had Olive, I finally have hope for Jaxx's future, and he does too. I can go on and on about this beautiful gift, Olive, but I am just so thankful for this life-changing blessing. It's been the most uplifting time since my son was born. **The tears of sadness have changed to tears of joy.**

Thank you, GDA |TLC volunteers, donors, and community. Thank you, Olive's puppy raiser, her incarcerated trainer, and all the Trainers who helped me in class. You have all given me the invaluable gift of peace and hope.

Sincerely Grateful,

Ali, Jaxx, and Olive 🐾



Volunteer Spotlight

April is National Volunteer Appreciation Month. On behalf of all of the Guide Dogs of America | Tender Loving Canines staff, we want to express our deepest gratitude to our incredible volunteers. Your unwavering dedication and selfless commitment are the cornerstone of our mission.

To celebrate, we asked some volunteers what their work at GDA|TLC meant to them.

PUPPY DEPARTMENT



"Volunteering enabled me to turn a hobby into a career (as an Orientation & Mobility Instructor) I never would have considered otherwise. I feel very fortunate to be a part of an organization that, in addition to giving such a wonderful gift to clients, has given so much to me!" –Lexie Dreyfuss

"I've worked as an Occupational Therapist for over 30 years and have dedicated my time as an OT to helping people and fostering independence, which is the ultimate goal for anyone with a disability. To see and experience how the GDA/TLC Dogs are so well trained and provide independence to those in need is simply amazing. The effort and dedication of this organization is truly beautiful, and I am truly honored to be a part of it." –Cathy Bradley



Your support will help us continue our mission, making a lasting impact by pairing service dogs with individuals seeking a brighter, more inclusive future.



<https://give.guidedogsofamerica.org/Donate-Today>



KENNEL DEPARTMENT



"The most rewarding thing is coming down here to the kennels; I just love working with the dogs. I think every dog has a unique personality. Another thing that made me feel good was when I found out they cost nothing to the people who need them, and there's no public funding for it. It's all people that care about the dogs and care about the mission." –Steve Pineau

"GDA | TLC is an organization worthy of support because of the hard work and dedication that the entire school commits to raising, training, and placing service dogs. I have seen firsthand just how impactful and important these service dogs are to the recipients, and I can say for sure that they are life-changing companions."
–Treyson Thomas



PUPPY RAISERS



"From Puppy Raising to volunteering, it's all been so enriching! In helping others, we help ourselves because we reap the benefits of the friendships and the experiences here – we are all the same people, all in the same world."
–Bob & Pam English

ADMINISTRATION SUPPORT

"I have always loved dogs and thought them to be smart, but in working with this organization, I have learned so much about how a service dog can truly change a person's life. They become the eyes for a blind person, calm for an autistic child and their family, and comfort to a weary Veteran, but even more than that, they give independence back to them, allowing them to live a much more joyous and fulfilled life."
–Marianne Meyer



CLIENT SERVICES



"Knowing that GDA | TLC runs solely on donations and offers these spectacular service dogs free of charge, as well as the airfare getting the students to and from the campus, the training, room and board for three weeks is absolutely incredible. Such a great organization to support financially as well as being a volunteer."
–Mona Ohl

MERCHANDISE SHOP GDA|TLC

To purchase, go to "Shop GDA" on guideddogsofamerica.org or call (818) 833-6429.

2024 LAPEL PIN

Platinum colored and black outlined Dog paw and Human hand High Five

PRICE: \$8.00

Tax, shipping, and handling not included. If mailing a check, please call (818) 362-5834 to determine additional tax and shipping charges required for payment.



2024 QUILT RAFFLE

This year's beautiful and detailed quilt, "Piece of our Heart Dogs," was crafted by the Quilt Squad! A friendship group comprised of members from the Orange County Quilters Guild. One lucky person will have the chance to take it home after the drawing on **Friday, December 13, 2024**. All mail must be postmarked by December 9, 2024, to qualify for a ticket. The cost is \$2 per ticket or \$10 for six tickets. Tickets can be purchased by mail, over the phone at (818) 833-6429, or in person at the school! If purchasing by mail, please include your address and phone number. (Quilt measures 58 in x 57in)

SAVE the DATE

EVENTS CALENDAR 2024:

May 4 Graduation

Jun 8 OPEN HOUSE

You're invited! Tour our seven-acre campus, visit the puppy kissing booth, mingle with puppies-in-training, watch working service dog demos, bid on amazing silent auction items and MUCH MORE!

Jun 20 Blood Drive

Jun 29 Service Dog Graduation

Jul 11-14 Kourpias K-9 Classic, SFO Area

Aug 24 Graduation

Sep 21 Dinner in the Dark

Oct 26 Graduation

Nov 14-16 Las Vegas Weekend

Dec 3 Giving Tuesday



GRADUATES
(PUPPY RAISERS IN PARENTHESES)

CLASS #426

TOP ROW: Megan & Paxton (Michelle Hogan), Kim & Jackson (Maria Habegger, Dennis & Maria Winn), Laura & Barlow (Michael Safty), Heather & Kernel (Tracy Sampson), Kim & Valoo (Leslie & Mike Adams), and Rosie & Kuma (Megan Becvarik)

BOTTOM ROW: Denise & Hendrix (Michael Madrigal), George & Grizzly (Gwen and Bob Whitson), Toni & Bingo (Dale & Lori Robertson), Richard and Espy (Kerry Muir), Vivian & Sparty (Rachel Hess), and Gilberto & Bruno (Debra Wilson & Mary Hall)

INSTRUCTORS (FROM LEFT): Analise Mendoza, Nicole Maples, Sydney Fujishige, Sonia Parisi, Jamie Hunt, Jessica Simpson

New Face in the Crowd

KATHERINE R. JUHL.
PUPPY PROGRAM COORDINATOR.

I have always had a passion for animals; whether it was dogs, horses, snakes, or birds—I was fascinated with them all! My love for animals led me to raise guide dog puppies throughout high school and college. During that time, I raised five puppies! After graduating from Texas Tech University, I worked at a summer camp/retreat center as their Day Camp Director and Program Specialist. I found my love for connecting others to the outdoors from that job. I am currently in the process of getting my American Sign Language Level 1 Interpreting certification. I am motivated and energized at the opportunity to assist in GDA | TLC's extraordinary mission. 🐾



Puppy Raising Corner

GDA|TLC Puppy Raisers brought their puppies-in-training to Fire Station 21 in Glendale, Ca. It is important for the dogs to experience new sights, sounds, and smells. This helps acclimate the puppies to all different environments before they become service animals for someone in need.

If you are interested in helping raise a puppy to become someone's perfect guide or service dog, you can learn more by texting "puppy" to 51555. 🐾





Guide Dogs of America



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**OUR MISSION STATEMENT:
TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH SERVICE DOGS.**

Cut along dotted line

MAKE A DONATION

If you would like to make a one time donation, please fill out the information below, cut along the dotted line and use the provided envelope to mail in your donation. If paying by check, please make check payable to **Guide Dogs of America**.

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Credit Card Number _____ Exp. Date _____



Donating to GDA|TLC has never been easier. Open the QR code reader or camera app on your phone and hold your device over the QR code to give or in your web browser type, <https://give.guidedogsofamerica.org/Donate-Today>