



partners

Guide Dogs of America | Tender Loving Canines



Three Kids, One Dog, and a Whole Lot of Love

Kaylie Schmidt, a mom of three—Wesley (5), Logan (10), and Lilyanne (15)—has a unique journey with her children, all of whom are on the autism spectrum. She and her husband, Scott, have had to be creative with strategies to help their children navigate daily. But when COVID-19 hit, it disrupted their routine, with Logan particularly affected.

"He had regressed to the point where he wasn't leaving the house," Kaylie explains. The family had to divide tasks to manage, and life became a struggle. Kaylie, a lifelong dog lover, considered a service dog as a potential support. After researching, she discovered Guide Dogs of America | Tender Loving Canines and was moved by their mission.

"They're so intentional in everything they do," says Kaylie, and soon the family applied for a dog. They had no idea how life-changing their future service dog would be.

A BIG-HEARTED LAB-GOLDEN RETRIEVER

The program required a 10-day training in California, meaning Kaylie had to leave her kids in Minnesota. While it was challenging to be away, meeting Hadley made it all worthwhile. "One of the hardest parts was keeping my kids calm while we waited," says Kaylie.

Kaylie shared the experience with her kids over facetime. When Logan saw Hadley, his response moved everyone to tears.

"He had been really struggling, so they knew it was a significant step in the right direction," she recalls. Hadley, a lab-golden retriever mix, was the perfect match for the Schmidts—fun, friendly, and hard-working. After 10 days,

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Leading this organization has been the honor of a lifetime, but after eight remarkable years, I have decided to retire and start the next chapter of my journey.

You welcomed a guy from Boston with a funny accent and treated me like family. Your guidance, support, and warmth were invaluable as I found my footing here. You didn't just work alongside me; you became my partners and friends. To the volunteers and puppy raisers, you taught me what it truly means to be of service. You are the heroes who make this program possible. To our donors, your generosity never ceased to amaze me. What I'll cherish most are those who, despite having little, contributed what they could because they believed so strongly in our mission. To my staff, in a world where greed and profits are increasingly rewarded, you taught me what it means to dedicate oneself to a mission. To the graduates, I extend my deepest gratitude. Each of you has faced challenges and hardships that many cannot imagine, yet your perseverance has inspired me every step of the way.

I am thrilled to introduce Tony Blevins as my successor. Tony has already demonstrated an exceptional ability to lead with vision, integrity, and a deep commitment to our mission. I ask you to show him the same warmth and grace you afforded me.

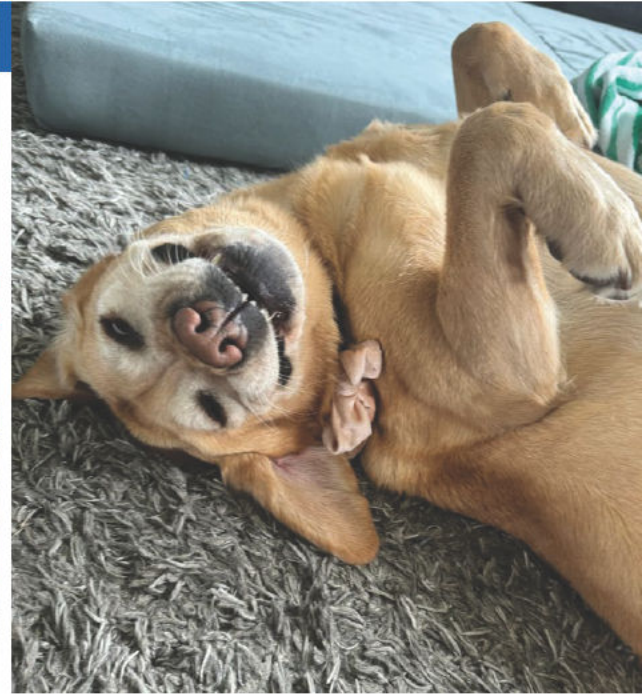
Thank you to everyone who played a part in making this the journey of a lifetime.

Russell Gittlen

Russell Gittlen,
President GDA|TLC



Continued on page 2



Continued from page 1

Kaylie returned home with Hadley, who quickly became a vital family member.

LIFE WITH HADLEY: A SURPRISE DIAGNOSIS

Just one week after bringing Hadley home, Kaylie received a surprise diagnosis: Stage 4 Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. The prognosis was positive, but she would need chemotherapy. During this challenging period, Hadley became an invaluable companion, not just for Logan but for the whole family. "For those first six months, she worked for me just as much as for the kids," says Kaylie.

Hadley began providing comfort and support beyond the original plan, helping Wesley and Lilyanne as well. One of Hadley's key skills, deep pressure therapy, has been transformative for the kids. "Sensory input can be overwhelming or underwhelming for kids on the spectrum," Kaylie explains. "If they're struggling, I can position Hadley to lie across their laps or feet, to calm them down and feel secure."

Hadley also helps the children manage demand avoidance; a behavior often associated with autism that involves resistance to tasks. By assisting with simple tasks like fetching shoes or helping with laundry, Hadley lessens the anxiety around daily demands.

Pre-loaded with commands such as, wave, bow, and fist bump, Hadley has proven to be an invaluable social tool for the kids, bridging gaps in communication and fostering connections in ways that words often cannot. **"The whole nuance of social interactions in general is complicated and complex for kids on the spectrum,"** says Kaylie. "Most people like dogs, so Hadley is a

great way to meet people and interact. The kids can show off her tricks," Kaylie continues. "We even made stickers with her face on them!"

A MORE JOYFUL PRESENT AND PROMISING FUTURE

To say that Hadley has exceeded expectations as a service dog is an understatement. "I don't have words for how amazing she is," Kaylie says. Originally intended to support one child, Hadley has become a key presence for the entire family.

"When I applied to get Hadley, I simply dreamed of going to the grocery store without issues. This year, we went to Disneyland for an entire week, staying until the park closed every day. Hadley even got to come on some of the rides with us!" "

—Kaylie Schmidt

Hadley has given the Schmidt family more than stability; she's given them hope and new dreams for the future. "We had accepted our present reality of being unable to do things together as a family," says Kaylie. **"Now, my husband and I get to experience our children together. We just dream bigger—I am seeing so much more on the horizon than I did before."**

"It's such a gift," Kaylie concludes. 🐾

Kris & Ziggy: Restoring The Spark to One of Our Veterans

Disclaimer: This article discusses military sexual trauma (MST) and its effects on veterans. The content may be triggering for some readers. If you or someone you know is struggling with MST, please consider reaching out to a mental health professional or support organization.

Army veteran Kris sought a fresh start. After over a decade in New York City—following several challenging years—she craved space and quiet. So, in the summer of 2024, she moved to Colorado Springs.

Joining her is one of Guide Dogs of America | Tender Loving Canine's (GDA|TLC) expertly trained service dogs, Ziggy, a playful black lab with amber eyes. Wherever he goes, Ziggy brings joy, even catching the attention of The Dogist, a famous social media account dedicated to dogs. Although Kris and Ziggy now have hope, their journey hasn't been easy.

WALKING THROUGH TRAUMA

In 2011, Kris joined a prestigious National Guard infantry unit after a brief Army stint. She was the first female medic to enter the unit and had achieved perfect scores on her physical fitness tests. Still, she grappled with the expectations to prove herself because she was a woman.

"I had a big job to represent women," Kris recalls. "I would carry the same weight as the guys in rucksacks while also carrying my medical bag."

Kris's relentless drive helped her rise to the challenge. **"I call it my spark,"** she says. **"It pushed me to try and be the best I could be."**

That was until 2017 when the unimaginable happened. While deployed in Ukraine, Kris was the victim of repeated sexual assaults by her platoon sergeant.

With nearly 9,000 reported sexual assaults in 2022 military sexual trauma remains a prevalent issue. Trust in the military justice system is low. A recent Brown University study reveals that actual assault rates may be two to four times higher than the Department of Defense estimates.

The abuse left Kris with profound emotional scars. "I felt like my whole life was flipped upside down," she says. Forced to encounter her perpetrator frequently, she suffered panic attacks and began self-medicating. Her college grades plummeted.

Finally, Kris went AWOL for two months before deciding to report the incident. Reporting didn't bring the relief she expected. She was forced to relive her trauma repeatedly before authorities took action.

"The PTSD from being interviewed might have been worse than the actual PTSD from getting assaulted," she shares. "I became a completely different person; I was not Kris anymore...I was a different, darker version of myself."

A TURNING POINT

Amid her pain, one thing offered hope: dogs. Having raised puppies for service. In the past, she turned to dog training with BluePath Service Dogs as part of her healing.

"There's so much reward in seeing dogs understand what you teach them," she says. "It's a relationship unlike any other." She adds, **"My job training dogs was the only thing that kept me alive."**

In 2019, Kris applied for a service dog from GDA | TLC, but finding the right dog to handle the hectic



environment of New York city was going to take some time.

After two years of waiting, Kris received a call in 2021. GDA | TLC had found her match: a bright-eyed black lab named Ziggy.

"We had an immediate bond," says Kris. "He has these light orange-yellow eyes that ease your spirit. When you look into them, you think about the good things."

A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Since being paired with Ziggy, Kris has achieved goals she once thought impossible. Before meeting Ziggy, panic attacks kept Kris from even sitting through a lecture. Now, she has not only earned her bachelor's degree with a perfect 4.0 GPA but is also pursuing a second degree in Exercise Science.

Today, Kris is checking off one goal after another. She bought a car and a house and moved to Colorado Springs after 12 years in New York City. Most importantly, she has dramatically reduced her reliance on anxiety medications.

"Before I got him, life was just going through the motions. I don't go through the motions anymore. Now, I have goals."

Just a few years ago, such a move would have felt impossible. But Ziggy's playful nature brings light to dark moments. "Even when I'm not feeling so great, I can chuckle at his antics. He makes situations easier by just being himself. He's a goofball," she says.

Kris's story reminds us that while the path to recovery is challenging, the love and support of a service dog can help illuminate the way forward. Her bond with Ziggy has helped her rediscover herself and rekindled her passion for life.

"He helped me find that piece of myself that I felt I was missing for five years," she says. 🐾

Editor's note: We would like to extend a special thank you to Kris for sharing her story for this newsletter. Her courage and bravery in discussing these experiences is not only inspiring but vital to raising awareness about an issue that affects countless service members.



IN LOVING MEMORY

With sadness, we note the passing of the following, guide dogs, service dogs, and breeders:

BREEDERS:

- Bella
- Eli
- Jace
- Madison
- Stryker
- Wilbur

GUIDE DOGS

- Blythe
- Champ
- Charley
- Coral
- Deco
- Gizmo
- Jethro
- Leo
- Sammy
- Scotty aka Scotch

SERVICE DOGS

- Murphy



MERCHANDISE SHOP GDA|TLC

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

STUFFED YELLOW LAB

Measuring 10", this precious pup features a classic golden coat and a sweet puppy look.

PRICE: \$20.00

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.

Holidays of HOPE



We believe that everyone deserves a future full of hope and possibilities. When you support our Holidays of Hope campaign, you create a ripple of hope that extends far beyond a single moment—transforming lives through the gift of a loyal and loving service dog. Together, we can bring light and opportunity to those who need it most, creating waves of lasting change for veterans, children with autism, and individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

Beginning on Giving Tuesday, December 3rd through the end of the year, every Dollar up to \$120,000 will be matched by Jane Huey and the Huey Family Foundation

STATISTICS:

- We lose 20 U.S Veterans to suicide every day

*Source: "2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report", www.mentalhealth.va.gov/

- 1 in 36 children is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder

*Source "Autism Statistics and Facts", Autismspeaks.org

- Only 44% of people who are blind/visually impaired are employed

- 38% turned down a job because of transportation concerns

*Source "Reviewing the Disability Employment Research on People who are Blind or Visually Impaired: Key Takeaways", www.AFB.org

GIVING LEVELS

Provide Students Hope - \$1,000

Your gift will support the training our students receive on campus, where they are partnered with a life-transforming service dog.

Give our Pupils Confidence - \$500

Provide one service dog-in-training the essentials they'll need while learning their important new job.

Sending Puppies Love - \$300

Ensure our young puppies have everything they need to learn and become confident, loving service dogs.

Ensuring a Healthy Future - \$100

Help our puppies start off on the right foot by covering the cost of their newborn care, microchip, and vaccines.



GRADUATES

(PUPPY RAISERS IN PARENTHESES)

GUIDE DOG CLASS #429

TOP ROW (FROM LEFT): Service Dog Teams- Anthony & Marley (Sheri Flay & Victoria), Jose & Dee Dee (Maritza Ozier), Sheila & Kato (Polly & Emily Power), Celina & Elsie (Cheri Lauterbach & Bob), Nathan & Duncan (Leah & Laurel Eriksen), Montana & Sasha (Ron & Julie Horn)

BOTTOM ROW (FROM LEFT): Dimitris & Anza (The Hill Family), Donna & Grizzly (Gwen & Bob Whitson), Fred & Essex (Bobbi Bass), Ben & Ireland (Julia & Mustasa), Daisy & Laddie (Laura Richwine), Kevin & Oona (Britt Sullivan)

INSTRUCTORS: Nicole Maples, Sean Chiles, Sean Deeb, Analise Mendoza, & Sonia Parisi



GRADUATES

(PUPPY RAISERS IN PARENTHESES)

GUIDE DOG CLASS #430

TOP ROW (FROM LEFT): Service Dog Teams- Carrie & Ruthie (Laura Myring), Jay & Nickel (Herman & Judith Poppe), Alex & Gretel (Deanna Valenzuela), Brad & Earl (The Montgomery Family), Griffin & Vivvy (Joshua Salinas), Thomas & Anna (The Morita Family)

BOTTOM ROW (FROM LEFT): Billy & Rincon (Jennifer Flores), Theresa & Jazzy (Tammy & Mark New), Lisa & Dahlia (Christina Johannsen), Tabitha & Hashi (Tomi & Paul Moore & Family)

INSTRUCTORS: Nicole Maples, Sonia Parisi, Jessica Simpson, Sydney Fujishige, Jasmine Versales



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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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☐ Cash ☐ Check ☐ Credit Card Donation Amount \$ _____ Phone: _____

Credit Card Number _____ Exp. Date _____



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