

Dogs come to the aid of diabetics

by Rachel Robinson

November is recognized as Diabetes Awareness Month, a campaign to raise awareness about Diabetes. As it currently stands, there are over 1 million people in North Carolina who have diabetes (either type 1 or type 2), and another 2.5 million who are at risk to develop type 2 diabetes. Diabetes continues to rise at alarming rates, and it's a very difficult disease to manage. Through the work at Eyes Ears Nose and Paws (EENP), diabetic alert dogs are trained to detect and alert their human companions to fluctuations in their blood sugar, to retrieve medical kits, and to get help in an emergency.

Elizabeth Nicholls, a UNC graduate student, has been a Type 1 Diabetic since she was 4 years old. Those 18 years of diabetes have numbed her to the symptoms of highs and lows until they are extreme and at dangerous levels. Prior to placement with her diabetic alert dog Rufus, Elizabeth said “the difference this dog is going to make in my life isn't just a number on my blood glucose monitor – it's the difference between a life of guilt and dread, defined by a disease I was resigned to, and a future in which I can and will be health, happy, and thriving.” Elizabeth Nicholls.

Elizabeth was partnered with Rufus earlier this year. Elizabeth explains that “almost immediately, the egregious highs that had characterized my last decade all but disappeared because Rufus would tell me about 45 minutes before they spiked

that something was happening.” After just 3 months with Rufus, Elizabeth’s A1c dropped 2 points, a number that falls in the category of ‘controlled diabetes’, which is a description that has not applied to her in at least a decade. For reference, every 1 point drop in A1c reduces the risk of diabetic complications by 21 percent. “What made my A1c drop was a diabetic alert dog that alerted with over 90 percent accuracy – better than any continuous glucose monitor I’ve ever used. [It] was a partnership that turned diabetes management from a fruitless chore I attempted on my own to a challenging but rewarding activity that Rufus and I do together,” Elizabeth said.

In Chatham County, 8-year-old Blair Hill lives with her diabetic alert dog, Justice. Growth spurts are usually exciting for children. For Blair, growth spurts come with unpredictable and often unmanageable fluctuations in her blood sugar. Her parents spent countless nights checking her blood sugar every hour. In 2017, that changed when Blair was partnered with her diabetic alert dog, Justice. Within weeks, Blair's parents were able to sleep a full night because of Justice. Instead of sleeping on the couch with alarms to check on Blair, Justice wakes them up when Blair's blood sugar is out of range.

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