



Epilepsy Advocate Spencer W.
and Lucia

CANINE CONNECTION

THEY'RE FURRY, THEY'RE FRIENDLY, THEY'RE PROTECTIVE—AND THESE DOGS MAY EVEN BE ABLE TO SENSE THE ONSET OF A SEIZURE.

BY AMY LYNN SMITH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN SPANIER



LUCIA PLACES HER LARGE, FURRY PAWS in Spencer's lap and nuzzles her dark, wet nose on the 10-year-old's cheek. But as Spencer buries his head in her golden fur, a silent cue sends Lucia away from the boy she loves and protects. She pads quickly into the kitchen to find Spencer's mother, Amy, and with her nose taps Amy on the hand.

Amy immediately goes into action, grabbing Spencer's emergency seizure medication and following Lucia back to Spencer. Through a simple tap, Lucia has signaled a possible pending seizure. Amy finds her son, who has just begun to seize, and helps him onto the floor where he's safe.

Lucia, of course, is no ordinary dog. She was raised by Canine Assistants, a nonprofit organization based outside of Atlanta that trains dogs for people with mobility difficulties, epilepsy and diabetes. Since 1991 the organization has placed about 1,000 dogs, including 200 seizure-response dogs, with individuals and families across the country.

Canine Assistants is the life's work of founder and director Jennifer Arnold, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis as a teenager and spent two years in a wheelchair. The program was her father's idea. Recognizing the lack of a local organization that trained service dogs to help people in wheelchairs, Arnold's father decided to form one of his own. But when he died before he could realize his dream, Arnold and her mother devoted themselves to his vision and launched Canine Assistants.





Almost from birth, Canine Assistants dogs are trained to perform a multitude of tasks.



Canine Assistants founder Jennifer Arnold

Training Days

Almost from the moment pups are born at the Canine Assistants facility, they're groomed for the important jobs for which they are destined. "We use golden retrievers, Labradors and golden/Lab mixes because of their natural ability to retrieve and use their mouth to turn on lights or open doors," Arnold explains.

Seizure-response dogs are trained to perform tasks such as staying with their owner during a seizure, pushing a button to call for help, or fetching medications and a telephone on command.

The 18-month training method used by Canine Assistants, called Choice Teaching, is designed to teach the dog to think things through and make the right choice. For example, to coach an unleashed dog to walk beside someone instead of running around, the trainer rewards the animal every time the dog stays alongside her. If the dog strays, he is simply ignored—not reprimanded or rewarded. "The dog very quickly learns to make his own choice," Arnold explains. "Epilepsy can be so unpredictable, and one day the dog is going to face a situation where he has to make the right decision."

Then, at last, it's time for all the dogs to meet their new owners at a required two-week training camp held on the organization's campus. Each match is based on the skill of the dog and the person's needs, and how well they connect after a few days of interacting.

While in the camp, the people receive almost as much

instruction as the dogs. There's an emphasis on helping people understand their dog, including ways their canine might alert them to a seizure. Arnold finds that many dogs instinctively recognize when their person is going to have a seizure, often 30 minutes or more before it happens. Not every dog, however, will develop the ability to anticipate a seizure. "Dogs can't be trained to predict the onset of seizures, but many may be able to sense seizure activity before it becomes apparent to anyone else," Arnold says. "Almost 90% of the seizure-response dogs we've placed have developed that ability within one year."

The Sixth Sense

Researchers are still trying to determine the scientific explanation for this phenomenon, but there are a number of theories. Some believe dogs may sense changes in the brain's electrical activity, and because dogs have a very keen sense of smell, they may also notice a shift in a person's scent. "Changes in brain activity might cause chemical changes that a dog could smell," says Adam Miklosi, Ph.D., director of the Family Dog Project in Budapest, Hungary, a research group that studies relationships between humans and dogs. "I also think dogs who can sense seizures may have a visual cue, because dogs are very good at observing very short, rapid bursts of movement."

Subtle changes in a person's behavior right before a seizure might also be a clue dogs pick up on, he adds. And Miklosi and Arnold agree that a close relationship is essential. "It's not very

scientific, but a dog will always be monitoring the person he or she lives with—it's about feeding, or taking a walk, or other kinds of social interaction," Miklosi explains. "Dogs are very tuned in to people, so if a very strong, intimate relationship exists, then the dog will be responsive."

Beyond Helping

Arnold hopes that research eventually will uncover the reason behind dogs' ability to sense seizures, which she believes could lead to better training techniques and perhaps even better epilepsy treatment. But even without the talent to recognize that a seizure is coming, a dog can make a meaningful difference in the life of a person with epilepsy. "Many people with seizure-response dogs have told me that their seizures are less frequent," Arnold says. "I think it might be because they're less anxious or stick to a better schedule to care for the dog. A lot of

people tell me they take much better care of themselves because they're caring for their dog."

Most important, Arnold believes in the power of how a canine companion can improve one's quality of life. "When you look in a dog's beautiful brown eyes and what is reflected back at you is that you are totally perfect, it changes how you feel about yourself," she says.

One look at Spencer and Lucia and their sense of mutual adoration is clear. Lucia is his protector, his friend and confidante, and a source of unconditional love. "Lucia has become a member of our family," Amy says. "But for Spencer, she is so much more. She gives him confidence." **EA**

Find out more about the Canine Assistants program, watch the PBS special and purchase Jennifer Arnold's book *Through a Dog's Eyes* at canineassistance.org.

True Tails

THREE EPILEPSY ADVOCATES SHARE STORIES ABOUT THEIR FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS.



Mandiye W. was diagnosed with epilepsy in 2003. She adopted her black Labrador, Medic, for companionship, but found that he could recognize her seizures. She took him to Pawsibilities Unleashed (pawsibilitiesunleashed.org) for training. "I once had a seizure in a store, and no one came when he started barking," Mandiye says. "He eventually jumped up on the customer service desk and kept barking until they figured it out. Medic has helped me keep my independence."



Rachel W., 10, was diagnosed with epilepsy at age five. Rachel's golden retriever, Cappi, came from Canine Assistants. "I sleep much better at night knowing Cappi is here to let us know if something happens," says Rachel's mother, Michele. "Because she has Cappi, I will let Rachel walk to school without me when she's old enough. Rachel has a list of things she might want to do when she grows up, and one of them is to train dogs like Cappi."



Rick S. was diagnosed with epilepsy in 1992. He's had his black Labrador, Sawyer, for almost five years, since before his nocturnal seizures were under control. Sawyer has had no training, but one night Rick woke up to find Sawyer in bed with him, lying across his waist. "I've hurt myself many times falling out of bed, so if I'd known Sawyer could help, I would have gotten him sooner. I've had my own home for three years, and with Sawyer here, I feel safe for the first time in my life."

THE SNOW COMPANIES



THE EPILEPSY COMPANY™

With an uncommon commitment to being The Epilepsy Company, UCB underwrites all the seizure-response dogs trained at Canine Assistants. UCB not only pays for training, but also for all expenses incurred—including food and veterinary bills—for the life of the dog.