

News and views that inform, inspire, and connect the Drummond Island and De Tour Village communities and points west.

Life After Leader Dog

By Nick and Julia Meier

Is there life after Leader Dog? For one very special black lab, the answer is a resounding “Yes” and he has touched the lives of thousands of people.

Jett began his life in typical Leader Dog fashion. Born on December 13, 2003, he was raised by a family who trained him according to Leader Dogs for the Blind guidelines. He learned the usual behaviors, including socialization and basic obedience commands. After that, it was on to Rochester, MI for final training. When he was eighteen months old, he was matched with Elaine Mueller and they were together for almost seven years. Elaine, her husband Art, and Jett were good friends of ours. They visited our home and farm often where Jett was allowed to play with our golden retriever, Katie Lynn, and to be off lead when we walked through the woods. While working, Jett was the consummate professional and he and Elaine were a great team. Then, Elaine felt a “bump” on Jett’s leg.



Elaine and Jett

Jett underwent surgery in October, 2010 and the mass was removed. Jett did not tolerate the anesthetic well. Unfortunately, the mass was cancerous. Elaine was now faced with several choices: remove the leg, proceed with a series of cancer treatments, or do nothing. Because Jett was almost seven, she made the decision to do nothing and let Jett continue to work until he was no longer able to do so. We told Elaine that, when the time came, Jett could come to live with us.

Over the next eighteen months, Jett and Elaine continued to work together. However, by early 2012, it became apparent to Elaine that Jett would not be able to work for much longer. He had lost a great deal of weight and would tire easily. Beginning in March, Jett had a series of overnight visits to our farm. In...April, Jett had a retirement party attended by thirty-five friends. When the last of the friends left, we sat on the couch with Katie Lynn at our feet. Jett, Elaine, and Art sat with us. Holding Jett’s Leader Dog leash and, with tears in her eyes, she said, “Jett, here is your new family.” As tears filled our eyes, she handed Jett to us.

The plan was for us to take Jett to our summer home and provide hospice care to him for the few months he had remaining. But, Jett had other plans.

Jett spent the summer at our home on the shores of Lake Huron in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He walked the beach with Katie, relaxed by the fire, and just became a dog of leisure. By the end of the summer, we noticed a change: Jett had gained his weight back and seemed more energetic. After a visit to the vet, we learned that Jett was symptom free and had appeared to have beaten the cancer on his own terms. Jett was about to bring a whole new meaning to the term “career change.”

Our golden retriever, Katie Lynn, a tripod and cancer survivor herself, had been a therapy dog for three years and we would visit a local elementary school each week where the children would read to her. So, in February, 2013, Jett joined Katie Lynn as a West Michigan Therapy Dog. Ever since then, Jett and Katie Lynn have visited our local elementary school and the children look forward to their visits. Soon, Jett and Katie Lynn would make an even bigger career move impacting the lives of more people than we could ever imagine.

Shortly after Jett graduated from West Michigan Therapy Dogs, we learned of HOPE Animal Assisted Crisis Response. HOPE’s mission is to provide comfort...



Jett at school

...and encouragement through animal-assisted support to victims of crises and disasters. We applied to HOPE. Then it was off to Erie, PA to be screened by them. Julia partnered with Jett and passed the screening with flying colors. Katie Lynn and I were a team, too. Two months later we all packed up and were off to Hartford, CT for a very intense three day training workshop. We did many disaster role playing scenarios,

learned about disaster response, how to work with various disaster service organizations, and learned all about FEMA and disaster response protocols. We also visited a local fire station to see how the dogs would handle the sights and sound of the big rigs. Of course, nothing bothered Jett and that was a tribute of his great training by Leader Dogs.

Another part of the training was at the Hartford International Airport. Since HOPE dogs fly in the cabin with their partners, we learned how to go through TSA screening. Little did we



Julia with Jett in his new HOPE attire

know at the time, that training would come in handy less than two months later. Jett and Katie Lynn were now full-fledged crisis response dogs. It was back to the UP to relax and enjoy life. Then, on September 16, 2013, a lone gunman entered the Washington Navy Yard.

Two days later, HOPE had "paws on the deck" of the Navy Yard. Four

days later, we were on a Southwest Airlines flight bound for Washington. While in route, the flight attendant explained to the passengers that Jett and Katie Lynn were on their way to assist at the Navy Yard. The passengers applauded.



Meeting the Secretary of the Navy

Jett and Julia spent the next week working near Building 197 where the shooting occurred. When the employees fled the building a week earlier, they left all their belongings behind. These belongings were bagged and taken to another nearby building where employees returned to collect them. Needless to say, that was incredibly stressful. Jett and Julia sat on a bench and comforted people as they entered and left. Many would quietly pet Jett, others would talk about various non-incident related things, and still others would share their feelings while they petted Jett.



Jett providing comfort at the Navy Yard

Over the course of the week, Jett touched the lives of hundreds of people. Jett was to return to the Navy Yard three more times over the course of the next eighteen months and was to touch the souls of hundreds more. Unfortunately, there would be more times when Jett would be called to give comfort.

Since the Navy Yard, Jett and Katie Lynn have deployed to schools in Northern Michigan and the UP on four occasions: three student deaths and one teacher death. In each case, we worked closely with the crisis response teams and counselors. Jett and Katie Lynn are great tools for the counselors to use



Jett at comforting students

in helping students, faculty, and staff cope with the crisis. On one occasion, a well-liked senior was killed in a car accident involving a drunk driver who had crossed the center line and struck the student's car head on.

The following school day, the small senior class assembled in the gym. Jett and Katie

Lynn were on mats on the gym floor. The students were still in shock and sat quietly in the bleachers, saying nothing. After some cajoling, the counselor managed to get the senior quarterback to come down and get on the mat with Katie. Then, she got another lineman to get on the floor with Jett. That opened up the floodgates of emotions and students began to join Jett and Katie Lynn on the floor. We spent two days there.

Jett continues to live a life of leisure Up North. At twelve years old, he is beginning to slow down a bit but is always up for the kids of DeTour Arts and Technology Academy read to him. He is also always ready for a walk on the beach. Hopefully, he won't be called upon to deploy to another crisis, but...

Is there life after Leader Dog? You bet. And Jett has certainly proved that.

Photos courtesy of Nick Meier

To learn more about HOPE see www.hopeacr.org

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Jett at the Secretary of the Navy

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