

## Diabetic Alert Dogs

For families who live with diabetes, a specially trained alert dog is a sweet friend indeed.

by Tucker Coombe

IT IS TWO IN THE MORNING AND ALEX, A LARGE, DEEP RED Golden Retriever, is right where he wants to be—lying on a pink and purple comforter atop a queen-sized bed, snuggled up next to 10-year-old Lindy Moser.

Suddenly, for no perceptible reason, Alex hops off the bed and trots into the room of Lindy's parents, Crystal and Randy. First he licks Randy's hand, and then, when there's no response, he jumps on the bed, licks Randy's face and plants himself squarely on his chest, refusing to budge until Randy gets out of bed and heads into his daughter's bedroom.

Four years ago, Lindy was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. Her body no longer produces insulin, the hormone that turns sugars into life-sustaining fuel for the body. For Crystal and Randy, one of the greatest challenges in managing their daughter's diabetes involves keeping a close watch over her blood-sugar level and ensuring that it stays within a normal range. But despite their vigilance, Lindy's blood sugar can drop or rise rapidly and unexpectedly, even in the middle of the night.

It is the job of Alex, a diabetic alert dog, to let Lindy's family know whenever this begins to happen. He works by scenting biochemical changes that take place in Lindy's body—in other words, when her blood sugar isn't where it's supposed to be, she just smells different.

Crystal and Randy live with the memory of the morning—long before the arrival of Alex—that Lindy awoke with blood sugar so low that, within minutes, she fell to the ground, lost consciousness and began to have a seizure.

"It was so scary," says Crystal, "because at that point, if you don't handle things right, she could die."

After Lindy's seizure, it was not unusual for her parents to get up two or three times a night to check her sugar levels.

"I was so exhausted, and every three or four months I would just sit down and cry," she admits. Then, on an online diabetes support group, she learned about Heaven Scent Paws, a family-run organization that trains and places dogs like Alex.

Michele Reinkemeyer, founder and director of Heaven Scent Paws in St. Elizabeth, Missouri, has trained and placed more than 60 diabetic alert dogs since 2001. She brings not just common sense and experience, but tremendous compassion to her work, for she is the mother of three children with Type 1 diabetes.

Although Reinkemeyer does not train all of the dogs herself, she does a lot of puppy testing, looking for the right candidates, dogs that that will be insistent, but not overly stubborn, responsive, not easily spooked, and nonaggressive. They must also have a good sense of smell. Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, and German Shepherds have all proven good at this work.

Not everyone with Type 1 diabetes needs the kind of intervention a dog like Alex offers, says Reinkemeyer. Moreover, she adds, families need to remember that these are working dogs that should not be treated like typical pets. In the Moser family, for example, Lindy must assume full responsibility for Alex's care, for



only then will the two of them establish the tight bond that is critical to his work.

As for casual snacks and leftovers, they are an absolute no-no for these dogs. Imagine, says Reinkemeyer, if an alert dog were accompanying his owner to a restaurant and discovered half a hamburger on the floor.

"Unless that dog knows people food is off limits," she explains, "he won't be down there waiting to alert, he'll be down there dining!"

Tonight, Randy checks Lindy's blood sugar and treats her with some Skittles. He then brings out the doggie treats, and Lindy and her parents take turns feeding Alex and praising him effusively for his "Good Low!" Then it's back to bed for everyone.

"Having Alex in the family," says Crystal, "has changed everything." ■

*Tucker Coombe is a Cincinnati-based freelance writer who is fascinated by the often-hidden abilities of dogs. She has written most recently about foster dogs for Cincinnati Magazine.*