



Stephanie and Ozark: A Dog with a Special Gift



A specially trained dog named Ozark helps a teacher with diabetes and her family feel safe. But that wasn't his only special gift.

Stephanie Lovdokken was still in college when she was diagnosed with diabetes 20 years ago. "My blood sugar has always been pretty brittle, so every little thing can affect it," she said. "Sometimes I know the reason, and sometimes I have no clue why my blood sugar is going up or down."

Stephanie is a fifth grade teacher, and often didn't notice when her blood sugar would plummet while she was teaching. But it was at night that the real danger lurked.

"I'd go to bed and my blood sugar would be totally fine, but then I would have nights where it would just all of a sudden drop abruptly."

Every night her husband would check on her blood sugar at bedtime, and Stephanie would set an alarm for every two hours so she could check it as well. "One night I went to bed it was 120," [normal' range 80-150 mg/dL] she recalled. "I hadn't eaten anything, hadn't taken any insulin, but I woke up suddenly and wasn't able to move or speak. I could only make small noises."

Fortunately those noises work her husband. "My blood sugar at that point read 19 on the meter," she said. "I have no idea how I even came to consciousness enough to make any noise at all. I was frozen."

The Lovdokkens live in Oregon and had met someone with a diabetes alert dog in Washington. After that incident they started looking around for a diabetic alert dog organization, but quickly discovered their local options were out of reach financially. "The organizations we found in Oregon charged around \$35,000 cash," Stephanie said. "We both teach and didn't have that type of money."





They found an organization in another state that was willing to work with them, but just as Stephanie was about to fly down to begin her training, they changed policies on working with out-of-state diabetics. "I spoke to someone who told me a new organization was starting up in California: Early Alert Canines."

EAC was not yet in operation when Stephanie reached out to someone associated with the group. "I asked if there was any way I could meet with her, and she said yes. I flew down and was accepted to be in their very first class."

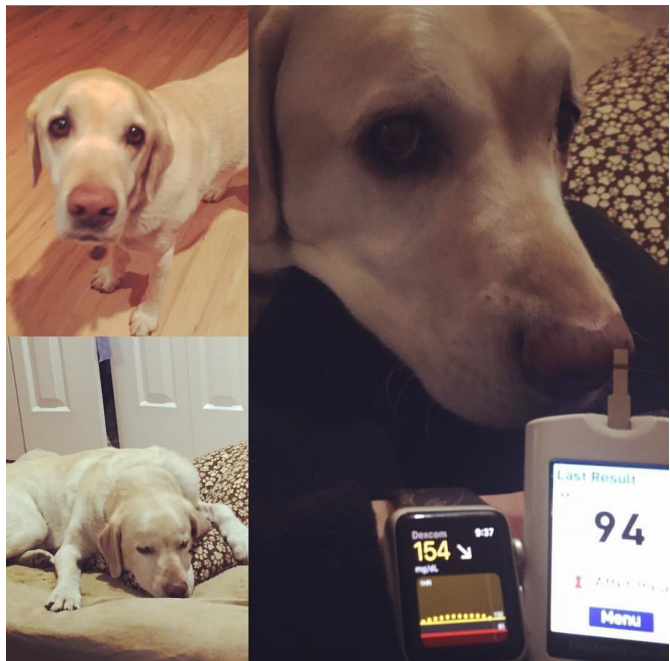
Within the year, Stephanie was back in California training with Ozark at the just-launched EAC. "I was fascinated with the whole process," she said. "It was a lot of work and kind of overwhelming at first. But

after a while, it was really fun. I loved seeing how the dogs would alert even when we first got there."

The biggest change in Stephanie's life since Ozark became her diabetes alert dog is that she trusts him more than she trusts her machines. "I've learned the dog is always right. One time I checked my glucose monitor and it was almost a hundred points off, but Ozark kept constantly alerting. When Ozark is telling me something's going to happen, even if the monitor is steadily reading normal ranges, I take it seriously."

Stephanie's hypoglycemic unawareness often happened while she was teaching. "I'd be so focused on the kids and what was going on, I wouldn't notice the changes in my body," she said. "And when you've got a classroom full of 32 kids, you're constantly on the go. Now Ozark will catch it and if Ozark catches it, even if I don't notice, the kids do! They say, 'What is your dog telling you?'"

Having Ozark has helped Stephanie and her whole family relax. "We know that no matter what, he's on it," she said. "Someone asked my daughter, when she was just 8 or 9, whether it was hard having Ozark work for her mom all the time and her not getting to play with him much. And she responded, 'Well I sleep through the night now.'"



They asked what she meant and she said, 'Before we had Ozark, I never slept. I would be awake at night and go into my mom's room and check on her because I was afraid she wouldn't be there in the morning. And now that we have Ozark, I know he's taking care of her.'"

Her fear wasn't misplaced. One night after Ozark joined her family, Stephanie had gone to bed with completely fine glucose monitor reading just as she had in the days before the dog. "My blood sugar was fine when I went to bed. My husband came in a little later and checked my continuous glucose monitor. It was fine then, too. In the middle of the night, Ozark started panting and jumping on me. He put his paws on my face. I woke up, my husband woke up, and we're both thinking, "What's going on?"



The continuous glucose monitor hadn't gone off, and it said her blood sugar was 110. But when Stephanie checked it with her other monitor, it had fallen to 69. "Ozark was waking me and saying, 'Hey mom, something's going on. You need to fix this,' she said.

Two of Stephanie's favorite stories about Ozark don't involve her. The first happened around three years ago, when she was going to a local gym every day because her daughter was in competitive gymnastics. At that point, Ozark had been with her for five years.



"He was really good at ignoring chaos all around us and just focusing on me," she said. "But one of my students was also a gymnast and so was at that gym every day, and she had another friend, not from my class, who also went to the gym. All of a sudden, every time that second little girl would come near us, Ozark would start yanking on the leash and trying to go out on the floor to get to her.

"Now, this little girl had not been diagnosed with diabetes. But after around a week of this, the little girl spent the night at the house of the girl

who was in my classroom and who was very familiar with Ozark and what he does for me. So my student told her friend's mom how the dog was behaving and said she thought that she should call me. And she did."

After speaking with Stephanie, the little girl's family took her to the doctor where she was diagnosed with type one diabetes. "The doctor was really impressed because she said they never catch a child when they're this healthy still, or get to diagnose them this early in the disease. She told them it was lucky Ozark caught it, because it could've been far worse."

Even more amazing was an incident that happened on a family trip to Disneyland. "We were walking around the park, and suddenly Ozark pulled on my leash and tried to follow another family," Stephanie said. "I tried to figure out what was going on, but he just kept tapping me, then moving toward that family."

Stephanie, somewhat embarrassed, took Ozark and went and introduced herself to them. She explained what Ozark was trained to do. "It turns out they had a child who is a diabetic. They asked if I thought he was alerting on her. I said I didn't know, but Ozark normally ignores children in crowds. And sure enough, their child's blood sugar an hour earlier had been normal and now was over 400."

The mother was almost in tears, and said she wouldn't have known to stop and check her child without Ozark's behavior; they thought everything was fine. "She begged me to tell her all about Ozark and diabetic alert dogs," Stephanie said. "It was incredible. I think Ozark has a special gift."

