



EarlyAlertCanines



As a pediatric radiation oncologist, Dr. Matt Hall has plenty of things to worry about at work. Thanks to a dog named Nona, his diabetes isn't one of them.

Matt was diagnosed with type one diabetes (T1D) when he was 16 years old, and was always able to keep fairly good control of his blood sugars. But during his radiation oncology residency, he began struggling with lows, particularly in the middle of the night. "I would get a poor night's sleep because I couldn't rouse myself sufficiently to wake up, fix my blood sugar, and go back to bed. As a result, I wasn't doing well in my training program, and I wasn't as happy or easy to live with as I should have been."

That's when Lisa, his then-fiancé (now wife) began researching how she might be able to help him. "She stumbled on information about Early Alert Canines (EAC)," he said. "We started learning about the abilities of medical alert service animals, and it really sounded like it was just what I needed."

Matt applied to EAC during his residency, and by the time he was ready to get his first job as a physician, he was paired with a Labrador Retriever mix named Nona. "After I got Nona, I really noticed a very prompt turnaround in terms of having better quality sleep, earlier identification of low blood sugars in the middle of the night, and just overall success in life as a result," he said.

Thanks to that turnaround, he, Nona, and his wife moved from one end of the country to the other so he could take a position as the lead pediatric radiation oncologist at Miami Cancer Institute and Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami, Florida.

While some people who bring a service dog into the workplace experience challenges, that hasn't been the case for Matt and Nona. "She's kind of been adopted by the entire radiation oncology program as the unofficial department mascot," he said. "When tour groups or visitors come through our department, they will always uniformly walk by my office and the staff will always say, 'Now, this is Nona. She's our service dog.'"

"I've been incredibly well supported at work," he continued. "Everyone is incredibly understanding and has let absolutely nothing stand in the way of Nona being able to do her job. When I first started, the hospital sent an employee from the workforce department that handles individuals with



disabilities to say that anything that I needed, please let them know. They said they didn't anticipate any problems, and indeed, there were no problems.”

While Matt said some of his coworkers may have had some skepticism at first, he actually understood how they felt. “When my wife and I first started exploring this idea, I didn’t even know dogs could do this kind of work,” he said. “I had heard that there were dogs that detected seizures and other conditions, but I didn't know that they could detect diabetes. Only after hearing about it, learning more, and seeing them in action, did I quickly come to realize just what these dogs can do.”

Matt enjoys Nona’s companionship at work, but he’s always aware she’s on the job. “I've noticed that since Nona joined our family, I haven’t had any close calls or absolute catastrophes,” he said. “She just catches everything far earlier than it otherwise would have been caught. She’s always on top of her job and doing everything and more that she's supposed to be doing.”

Nona made other changes in Matt’s life, too. “I learned quickly to adjust my schedule and my priorities in life to better support her,” he said. “It's really important for her to have her fun time and reward time. And we make a point twice a day to go for walk just so she can be a regular dog. I make it a point to play, which is something I would never have done before. It’s the least I can do for her, as she's tirelessly working to support me.”

Matt’s experience with EAC is also part of his success story. “Carol, Beth, and all of the members at EAC have been incredibly supportive and incredibly available to help with any issues, questions, or concerns, both before and after we took Nona home,” he said. “It's just wonderful to have such a great group of people who are so firmly committed to their clients and their success. I can't say enough good things about everyone who works for EAC.”

It’s not only Matt’s life that was changed forever the day he met Nona. “It's really important to share how much Nona has meant to me, and also to my family,” he said. “When I was first diagnosed, my mother would wake up in the middle of the night and she would call me on the telephone every night just to make sure that I was okay.



“After I got married, sometimes my wife had to deal with the same thing, and it was to the point where I would check in with family members several times throughout the day just to let them know everything was okay, that I had eaten dinner and successfully made it through the day.

“Now that I have Nona, everybody trusts that Nona will be on top of things all of the time. She’s enabled my wife and my mother to feel far more comfortable, to know that I’m always being looked after. And that’s probably the best testament to how wonderful she is.”