

Strength and courage grow out of bond with diabetes alert dog



Haley Gibb was a college student finishing up her final exams for the fall semester of her senior year when life hit her with a road block.

"I had a severe inflammatory response with strep and an ear infection, a high fever, and a loss of 20 pounds in a week," she said. "I was back east in Pennsylvania at college, and my family was home in California. I went to the ER, where they found I had a blood sugar of over 600."

In what Haley says she considers malpractice, they let her eat whatever she wanted, including a burrito. "They assumed I was a type 2 diabetic because of my age," she said. "They gave me insulin and started me on Metformin, a medication used to treat type 2 diabetes, then sent me home without insulin, a testing kit, or antibiotics. They didn't prescribe insulin, or even show me how to use a glucometer before discharging me. I was on my death bed, and they didn't see any need for me to be admitted."

Her father flew out to be with her, and she took a medical leave of absence from school. Because of a diagnosis six years earlier with an autoimmune condition known as Hashimoto's disease, Haley already had an endocrinologist in California, who put her on Lantus, along with Humalog for short-acting insulin needs.

"I had just one month over Christmas vacation to get educated on my condition," she said. "To learn carb counting, dosing, correction dosing, how to treat low blood sugars, how to test for ketones when sick, how to administer glucagon, everything, before flying back to school to graduate on time with my class in May. I also had to educate all my friends and new professors for the spring semester in case I had any diabetic episodes. It was surreal."

Haley managed pretty well until she was hit by a bad stomach bug. "I needed a whole team of doctors to get me through," she said. It knocked me off my feet. That was the first time I'd experienced an illness since my diabetes diagnosis."

Despite that setback, Haley graduated on time. She returned to California, and became part of a clinical trial at UCSF for infusions of regulatory t-cells, which can protect the pancreas from further deterioration. She's still part of the trial, and her diabetes has been stable.

"After I came back from school, I went right into my business with my mom, co-owning a Pilates studio in Carmel," she said. "Unlike when I was in college, I was on my feet and moving around all day,



so I started to experience a lot of low blood sugars and to develop hypoglycemic unawareness. My endocrinologist said I needed other forms of monitoring. We started with a continuous glucose monitor, but it had a half-hour lag time.

"I had grown up with dogs, and began to look into that as an option. I had applied to several other organizations and had never heard back, not even boo. I was at a loss as to what to do, as I was living by myself and afraid I wouldn't wake up in the morning. My parents wanted me to move back in with them, saying they didn't want to get a phone call one day that I was found unresponsive."

Her family came across a dog who was being fostered for Early Alert Canines (EAC) when they were out one day.

"The local foster encouraged me to apply, and EAC had a potential match for me right away! I went up and went through the interview process, about how to work with the dog and what a diabetic alert dog does."



The dog they matched her with is a yellow Labrador named Brave. "It's been absolutely life changing to have a four-legged friend with me everywhere I go," Haley said. "Brave is so talented, and very persistent. If I'm not responding to her alerts, she has no problem going up to anyone else who might be around and letting them know something's wrong. When I first saw her alerting on other people, I thought she needed to be redirected, but my boyfriend said no, I think she's trying to alert me about you! A few times when that happened, it turned out I had very low blood sugar."

Brave normally starts with what Haley calls a "soft alert," essentially a stare-down. "If I'm not making eye contact with her, she starts to weight transfer across her paws, and then does a paw float through

the air, and then she paws me. If I still don't get it, she goes and gets someone else's attention. She always has my back."

At first Brave wasn't comfortable alerting in the car, but she got over that fast. "She pops up in the back of the car and puts both paws over the back of the seat," Haley said. "I know that means, 'Pull over right away, mom. And no, you can't wait until you get there.'"

Haley says she didn't know at first that the dog would usually run 15-20 minutes ahead of her meter. "I'm able to get an alert from Brave, tell her to stand by for an 8 minute retest, and usually I've either spiked or tanked a considerable amount. It's the power of scent; it's so profound."





In one dramatic example of Brave's ability and determination, Haley was hanging out after having had dinner, watching Brave play with her toys. "Out of the blue, she ran over and grabbed my meter and threw it at me!" Haley said. "I thought she was playing with it like a ball, and I put it down, but she did it again. I tested and was over 200, and clearly hadn't dosed enough for my meal. I had a puppy party for her and retested, and it had gone up even higher."

Haley's boyfriend suffers from hypoglycemia. "When I first got Brave she pawed him a lot, and we started testing him. Sure enough, she was catching his low sugars, too! We've reinforced with her that I'm her main target and she needs to focus on me, but if I know I'm okay and she goes up on him and starts pawing, he always tests and she's always right.

"The dog is always right. That's what I'm learning."

Brave is particularly on point with alerts out in public. "Even in the hustle and bustle of Costco, she's relentless!" Haley said. "We'll have a full-blown puppy party in the aisles when she does that. I am so appreciative I have that freedom, because of her."

Haley says she had to really strengthen her voice when she got Brave. "I'm a normal-looking female in her mid-20s, and I have an invisible disease," she said. "I like to dress up and do all that, and when you have a fur baby in tow everywhere you go, people don't always trust that your dog is a legitimate medical alert service animal. I've had to learn how to be Brave's best advocate. If I can't be an advocate for her, she can't be an advocate for me and my wellness.

You have to be very firm about it, but people are buying service animal vests off the Internet and aren't aware they're compromising our public access rights by taking their dog everywhere. But I'm not going to let the next disabled person walk into a business and face the same discrimination I've faced. They may not be able to advocate for their rights the way I have. I've grown a backbone; I did it for Brave."

