

SOUTHLAKE

Trained dogs can offer life-saving alerts

Pet taught to detect blood sugar drop in diabetic boy may, eventually, bring worried family peace

By AVI SELK
Staff Writer
aselk@dallasnews.com

Billy Stone was the last to pet his new dog. Only after his grinning sister and weeping mother embraced the German shepherd did the tall, skinny boy stroke Cindy, hesitantly, on the top of her head.

Billy walked Cindy a few steps through Love Field, which was just starting to fill up on a drizzly September morning. Then he handed the

leash back to the woman who had brought the dog from Amarillo and trained it to detect the scent Billy emits when too much sugar burns out of his blood.

"I don't know if I can control her in crowds yet," said the 13-year-old diabetic, his eyes fixed on the \$10,000 dog that may one day save his life.

In the 30 months since her son was diagnosed with Type 1

diabetes, Denise Stone's nights have gone like this:

She stays up until 11 p.m. to prick Billy's finger and make sure his glucose (blood sugar) level is OK. The checkups don't wake Billy, a notoriously deep sleeper. Once, a few weeks after he was diagnosed, he dreamed calmly as his blood sugar plummeted to a near-lethal low.

Stone gets a few hours' rest, then gets up at 2 a.m. to check on Billy a second time. If his glucose level is too high, she gives him a shot of insulin. If



Cindy, a German shepherd, meets the Stone family at Love Field airport after being trained in Amarillo to detect the scent Billy Stone emits when too much sugar burns out of his blood. Without Cindy, Denise Stone had to wake up several times every night to check on her son.

See **DOGS** Page 2B

KHAMPHA BOUAPHANH/Special Contributor

Scroll down to read
"the rest of the story."

Dogs trained to keep nose on their owners

Continued from Page 1B

it's too low, she brings him Cheerios and orange juice.

Then she waits 20 minutes to check him again. If he's still not in range, she does it a fourth time, and maybe a fifth, not daring to sleep until she's confident that her son won't slip into a coma before he wakes for school.

Her husband, an executive at a data storage firm, fills in when he can, but Stone is exhausted. Last week, she slept through three staggered alarms and awoke late to check on Billy.

"I just thank God I woke up on my own," she said. "It was the longest walk to his room."

Stone searched a long time for a solution to the nightly ordeal. A sensor attached to an electronic monitor is embedded in Billy's lower back, but the device is inaccurate and its alarm too quiet to trust at night. The family also tried acupuncture to keep Billy's glucose level more regular.

In 2007, Stone read about diabetic alert dogs — animals trained to detect the distinctive scent people release when their blood sugar drops.

She spent the next year "on a mission from God" to find one.

Stone called across the country, researched library archives and hounded reporters, trying to find a reputable trainer. Last year she flew to California to plead with a nonprofit that gets 100 applications for every dog it gives out. She was devastated when the group couldn't help her.

Then, a few weeks later, she learned that a friend of a friend had bought an alert dog from a mom-and-pop operation in Amarillo called Adobe Kennels. The client told Stone her dog would unfailingly rouse her when her daughter's glucose level went out of range.

Stone phoned the kennel immediately and talked to Mary Westbrook, a 73-year-old preacher's wife who has trained German shepherds for 17 years "as kind of a hobby."

When Westbrook agreed to train an alert dog for Billy,



Denise Stone, with son Billy and daughter Stephanie, greets Cindy, their new service dog, and her trainer, Mary Westbrook. Training is crucial when a dog moves in, Westbrook says.

KHAMPHA BOUAPHANH/Special Contributor

Stone burst into tears.

"I couldn't believe it," she remembered. "I had called New Zealand, I had called all over the planet trying to find this dog."

The smell of wet dog drifted through the Stones' den in Southlake on the morning they brought Cindy home.

While Westbrook and the family gathered round, Billy lay on the floor between his dog and his glucose monitor.

"I must be dropping pretty fast, because my eyes are start-

ing to water," he said, watching the digits on the monitor count down with his blood sugar.

His eyes weren't the only moist ones. Stone sat across from Billy, fighting tears as she watched the object of her quest lie with its paw draped across her son's leg.

The scene was even emotional for Westbrook, who had held Cindy when the dog was born — coincidentally, two days before Billy was diagnosed.

But the trainer hadn't come to Dallas for sentimental reasons.

"Search, Cindy. Find the low," she commanded after Billy's level had dropped enough to emit the scent, which the dog had previously known only from a T-shirt the Stones had FedExed to Amarillo.

Cindy sniffed Billy for a few seconds. When she found "the low" and licked his hand, she was rewarded with a piece of hot dog.

Drills like this would be repeated for weeks, gradually becoming more complicated until — everyone hoped — the Stones could trust Cindy more than any sensor or alarm clock.

Dog buyers: Beware of bad trainers

A diabetic alert dog can cost thousands of dollars and will be responsible for someone's safety. Trainers are unlicensed and unregulated, and not all of them have great track records, so do your homework.

A good starting point is www.diabeticalertdog.com. Use the site's forums to ask dog owners for leads on good (and bad) trainers. Check out trainers thoroughly. Ask for a tour of their facilities, and ask them to put you in touch with past clients. Find out exactly how they train their dogs and compare their methods to the standards on www.assistance dogs international.org. (Click "ADI Standards," then "Service Dogs.")

Look for a trainer willing to do follow-ups at home.

Be especially careful about companies that train many dogs at once or that have short wait times for clients to get their dogs. Good trainers take their time.

Avi Selk

Hanging over the arm of the sofa, Billy's little sister, Stephanie, eyed Cindy forlornly. She'd wanted a dog all her life and had turned her 11th birthday party into a fundraiser that netted \$5,000 toward Cindy's cost.

She desperately wanted to play with the dog, but understood that she had to keep her distance while Cindy trained.

"I think I'm low," she joked sadly.

With an estimated 6 million insulin-dependent diabetics in the United States, trainers of alert dogs are popping up across the country. The trainers are not regulated, and they sell animals whose abilities have never been scientifically tested.

Without a doubt, many dogs work. Several of Westbrook's clients swear by her, including a high school principal in Missouri whose German shepherd jumps on his daughter's bed and "licks her to death" when her level drops.

But among the success stories are troubling accounts of failure.

"We made some mistakes," said Ann Pulliam, the owner of Betheden Kennels near Amarillo. Problems arose after a weeklong class in June in which 11 diabetics were introduced to their \$6,000 alert dogs.

One customer returned her dog this week. She claimed she'd passed out a half-dozen times from low blood sugar, waking to find the dog curled beside her, napping. Another client said she's spent \$2,000 retraining her son's dog, which still won't reliably alert her.

Last year, the state of Missouri sued a nonprofit called Heaven Scent Paws, claiming it gave dozens of clients poorly trained dogs in exchange for hefty donations. The suit is pending.

Even Westbrook said trainers needed to be regulated.

"I wish I had to go somebody and show somebody what this dog can do," she said. "But I didn't. I got on an airplane with a dog that nobody knew, just because I said she's a service dog."

Cindy's paws skidded across the wooden floor as Billy walked her in circles through her new home.

Westbrook followed the awkward pair, barking commands as she trained the boy to train the dog.

"Pretend you're carrying a suitcase," she told Billy when Cindy strayed from his side. "It's a sign of disrespect if she goes in front of you or behind you."

Training, Westbrook warned, is crucial if Cindy is to one day be entrusted with Billy's life. Of the 10 dogs Westbrook has placed, she said, two never learned to alert — failures she attributed to the families.

Stone knows there are no guarantees — with diabetes, there never are. But she is already resting easier knowing Cindy is in the house.

"And hopefully," she said. "The sleep's going to come, soon enough."