

Trained to save lives

Dogs help diabetics manage their condition

By John Larson

jl Larson@tacomaweekly.com

A local man is training dogs to help diabetics manage their condition and stay healthy. Dogabetics is a line of business Ron Pace recently developed at Canyon Crest K-9 Training Center. Located on five acres just east of Tacoma, the business has trained dogs for law enforcement agencies for many years.

Dogabetics came about last year when Lisa Kelly of Gig Harbor contacted Pace. Her son Liam, 15, had recently been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

Kelly attended a conference on the East Coast where she observed a dog trained to detect changes in glucose levels on human breath. Kelly wanted a dog that could have tight control over her son's condition.

"A dog can do that," Pace remarked.

She thought she had found such a dog from a trainer in Texas. She wanted some guarantees on what she was paying for, which that trainer balked at. Kelly tried getting dogs from California and Missouri, to no avail. Frustrated by the delay, she asked Pace if he would consider training such dogs, which he agreed to.

Liam has been paired



PHOTO BY JOHN LARSON

MAN'S BEST FRIEND. Jay Pacht of Seattle with his dog, Husker.

with Max, who is trained to key in on glucose levels when they drop below 80 or rise above 180. If it goes too high, Liam might need to administer insulin. If it drops too low he might have to sip some juice.

Pace taught Liam how to make Max obedient. The boy brings the dog to classes with him at Gig Harbor High School.

"I believe in teaching people how to train dogs, so they know what to do with them," Pace remarked.

"This is about a boy

with diabetes, a mom on a mission and a dog with a job," Kelly remarked. "This all came from my desire to keep my kid healthy. We were really fortunate. We are so thankful to everyone involved."

Pace said he is among a handful of trainers in the world working in this particular field. So far he has trained six dogs. One was for a woman from Florida who went blind from her diabetes. Her dog was trained both as a seeing-eye dog and to detect glucose levels.

So far Pace has used golden retrievers, Labradors and lab mixes. One was a Labrador/poodle mix for a 9-year-old Tacoma boy.

The cost of a dog and training is around \$15,000. Realizing not everyone can afford this, Kelly has started a non-profit organization called Dogs for Cures to help cover expenses for diabetics with limited incomes.

Three days after getting his dog Husker, Jay Pacht of Seattle became unconscious when his insulin levels dropped dramatically. He credits the dog with saving his life.

Pacht was diagnosed with diabetes four years ago. Having Husker around "helps me recognize how to deal with the disease on a more conscious level," he said.

A recipient of another dog is a 57-year old Tacoma man. Pace said the man was homebound. When his wife was at work, she used to call home every hour to check on his condition. Now his canine companion can do this.

Pace, who has trained dogs for 30 years, said the success of Dogabetics makes him feel good. "The dogs are a great tool to keep people in their proper range," he said. "They are prolonging life and improving the quality of life."