



**AUBURN/
OXFORD**

FLASH

A product of the
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

[Telegram.com](#) | [OntheCommon.com](#) | [Where you can find the Flash](#)

Blogs

Auburn Photos

Oxford Photos

Message boards

Auburn

• [Post a message »](#)

Oxford

• [Post a message »](#)

Thursday, February 26, 2009 [E-mail this article](#) | [Print this article](#)

Business directory

4 Paws for Alex unites epileptic boy with dog

Family thanks community

By **Ellie Oleson** CORRESPONDENT

[Add a comment](#)

AUBURN — Thanks to a little boy and his very supportive community, children across the country will enjoy the lifesaving safety of a personal canine guardian angel.

Alexander John LeBlanc, 6, a kindergartner at the Mary D. Stone School, had been a healthy baby and toddler until July 17, 2006, when he fainted while out shopping with his mother.

"He collapsed, then woke up embarrassed. It was a hot day, so his doctor thought it was heat exhaustion. He'd had no head injury, and there was no family history of seizures," said Alex's mother, Deanna L. LeBlanc.

Two days later, Alex fainted again. A cardiologist put him on a 24-hour monitor, but everything was fine, except Alex did have one other symptom.

"He would show confusion occasionally. He was just 3-1/2. He couldn't tell me there was something wrong," Mrs. LeBlanc said.

A trip to a neurologist at Children's Hospital Boston provided an unexpected diagnosis. Alex has a severe form of epilepsy called myoclonic-astatic epilepsy, known as Doose syndrome, which affects only 1 percent to 2 percent of children with epilepsy and is more common in boys than girls.

Medication was of little help. Alex was suffering potentially life-threatening drop seizures 10 to 30 times a day. That meant his parents had to watch Alex 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and he had to wear a helmet most of the time.

Mrs. LeBlanc, who had worked in retail, became a stay-at-home mom for daughter



In seizure cases, such as Alex's, the dogs, who can smell a change in chemistry, will bark a warning about 20 minutes before a seizure.



Jennifer, 8, and Alex. She rested only when Alex's father, Jeffrey D. LeBlanc, an engineer at EMC Corp. in Hopkinton, was home.

There was one ray of hope. A nonprofit organization called 4 Paws For Ability, based in Xenia, Ohio, trains and places service dogs, including dogs that can sense a seizure coming and warn the patient and family. The problem was that the cost of such a miracle would be \$11,000.



"I came to Auburn High School last February to see Gerard DeLongchamp, the assistant principal. I asked him if the kids could help me hang fliers around town. He called back and said the school would do a fundraiser for us," Mrs. LeBlanc said.

Auburn High School Principal Casey J. Handfield has two children at the Mary D. Stone School, where Alex had been a "typical" child in the preschool before he joined the ranks of his classmates with special needs. Mr. Handfield allowed high school students who made a donation to wear hats for a week at school, where hats are normally not allowed. Oxford Middle School also joined "4 Paws for Alex" with a similar fundraiser.

The Auburn Police Association, International Association of Fire Fighters Local 4157, Auburn Rotary Club, EMC Corp., Imperial Chevrolet of Milford, My Alma Mater Café of Auburn, PetSmart of Millbury, St. Joseph Parish of Auburn, St. Mary Stewardship Ministry of North Grafton, and numerous families donated to the cause. More than \$17,000 was raised for 4 Paws For Alex, far exceeding the goal of \$11,000.

Natalie A. Niece, associate director for 4 Paws For Ability, said that all extra funds were used to help other families who had been unable to reach their goals. "We helped more than a dozen children this year, including kids from Florida, Arizona, Texas, Ohio and Massachusetts. Most of our placements are with autistic children. The dogs will touch them with a paw or nuzzle them, to distract them from self-injury."

In seizure cases, such as Alex's, the dogs, who can smell a change in chemistry, will bark a warning about 20 minutes before a seizure.

"We also teach the dogs tracking, so that each child has his or her own personal search-and-rescue dog. We have had incidences of lifesaving behaviors, when the dog has tracked a child who wanders away," Ms. Niece said.

As the LeBlancs neared their goal last year, the Mary D. Stone School and Wal-Mart of Oxford donated 50 T-shirts Alex needed to prepare his service dog, Mrs. LeBlanc said. "After Alex had a seizure, I would put the T-shirt he was wearing in a Ziploc bag, give him a bath and put him in a clean T-shirt, which I would also bag up after a few hours. That way, the dog they were training for him could smell a seizure shirt and a non-seizure shirt. In all, I mailed 76 shirts to Ohio."

The family traveled to Ohio for training with "Honor," Alex's 68-pound Goldendoodle, a cross between a poodle and a golden retriever, in October. Since coming home in November, Alex and Honor have been inseparable, Mr. LeBlanc said.

"I love my dog," Alex said, hugging his friend.

Elizabeth A. Chase, Mary D. Stone principal, said students at the school have accepted Honor into their classrooms with joy. "Alex and Honor are not a burden, but an opportunity to teach sensitivity, awareness and inclusion."

Alex's classmate Ethan S. Petrie, 5, said, "Honor is white and fluffy. He takes care of Alex and makes sure he's safe."

Samantha E. Stokes, 6, said, "Honor never barks in class. My dog would bark."

Assemblies were held at the school to introduce Honor and explain that he is a working dog, who should not be petted or distracted from his important job of watching Alex.

The First Grade Team of teachers at the school applied for and received a state Community Service Learning Grant to teach the community about service dogs, Ms. Chase said.

Last month, the LeBlanc family recognized the students and staff of Auburn High School and others who had donated to 4 Paws for Alex with plaques during a break in the school's Winter Carnival finale, held in the school gymnasium.

"Thank you," Mrs. LeBlanc said. "Because of you and these townspeople, this is what we have. We wanted to recognize and thank everyone."

Whether it is because of Honor, medication or a Christmas miracle, as of this

writing, Alex had not had a seizure since Dec. 18.



Click here
*to subscribe to the
Telegram & Gazette*

[Add a comment](#)

[OntheCommon.com](#) | [telegram.com](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Submissions policy](#) | [Contact us](#)
© Worcester Telegram & Gazette Corp. | Order the Telegram & Gazette, delivered daily to your home or office!