

A boy and his working dog

by Linda Stone

I have a t-shirt that says, “Woof, woof, woof. (Timmy’s in the well).” If you grew up like me, a dog-obsessed child of the 60’s, you get the joke. In the series that brought the story of Lassie to television, Lassie was not only the most brilliant dog ever, but the smartest, most intuitive character on the show. She (played by a he) was a gorgeous Collie and little Timmy’s constant companion on the family farm, alerting the family to all forms of trouble by barking and leading them to the problem. I don’t know if there ever really was an episode where Timmy fell down a well, but it makes for a funny t-shirt. Why funny? I guess because as us baby-boomers grew up we realized that no dog was that smart or that perfect.



However ... enter Demarco and Chino.

Demarco is as rosy-cheeked as any child actor and Chino is a red Whippet with a black mask, white toes and intense dark eyes. Their story is more amazing than anything a television writer could dream up because *it's real*. Chino does not do Demarco’s homework or rescue kit-

tens from a fire, but he saves Demarco’s life on a regular basis. Demarco is a six-year-old boy with Type 1 diabetes, and Chino is his 7-month-old hypo-alert dog.

Before I heard their story, if you were to ask me what a hypo-alert dog was, I would have told you about the greyhound we used to have, who never even raised his head when my son let the cable man into the house. And I would say that I definitely prefer hypo-alert to hyper-alert, which would describe my daughter’s mini-dachs who barks every time a bird burps in a tree on the next block. Neither of these descriptions fits Chino.

Demarco has a condition which is quite common in Type 1 diabetics called *hypo unawareness*. Sometimes he can not feel his blood sugar slipping, and often it is too late to treat him with sugary food or drink, as he will soon be unconscious. That is where Chino and hypo-alert dogs come into play. They are not meant to solve a diabetic’s condition, but to alleviate the symptoms of hypoglycemia. Even in this age of medical miracles, managing diabetes, especially in a young child, is an exhausting and delicate task. Chino’s presence does not replace modern medicine—insulin is injected into his stomach daily. If he hasn’t eaten in a while or has had a lot of exercise, that insulin is going to start gobbling up any sugar in the blood. This is the basic definition of a hypo, and the main causes of a hypo are not eating regularly enough, too much activity, too much insulin and fast metabolism. You can imagine how active a six-year-old boy is—it’s a vicious circle. If, in an effort to keep Demarco from going hypoglycemic, Kate cuts back on his insulin dose and gives him more food, his blood sugar goes through the roof—NOT good for the kidneys or cardiovascular system.

When Chino picks up, through scent, that Demarco’s blood sugar is dropping, he will often whine or bark for seemingly no reason. Since lone Whippets are usually very quiet, it is a shock for Kate to hear him bark. Anytime Chino shows unusual behavior, such as running over to Demarco and whining, barking, jumping up and

trying to keep him from moving, Kate knows to test. She has been overwhelmed to see the numbers on his glucometer. They are always in the “danger looming” range. She says, “It has always been a tremendously difficult job to keep him stable and in the healthy blood sugar range. It wasn’t until he was asked to leave his preschool as a result of daily hypoglycemic attacks that I realized I needed to do some further investigation. I came across *Paws for Diabetics** in an Australian edition of a *Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF) magazine*.”

Chino was exactly eight weeks old when he flew from Sydney to Brisbane. Before his arrival, Kate was instructed to collect a sweat specimen from Demarco while he was having a hypoglycemic episode, which was then sent to Chino’s breeder. She was also given a very comprehensive training program.

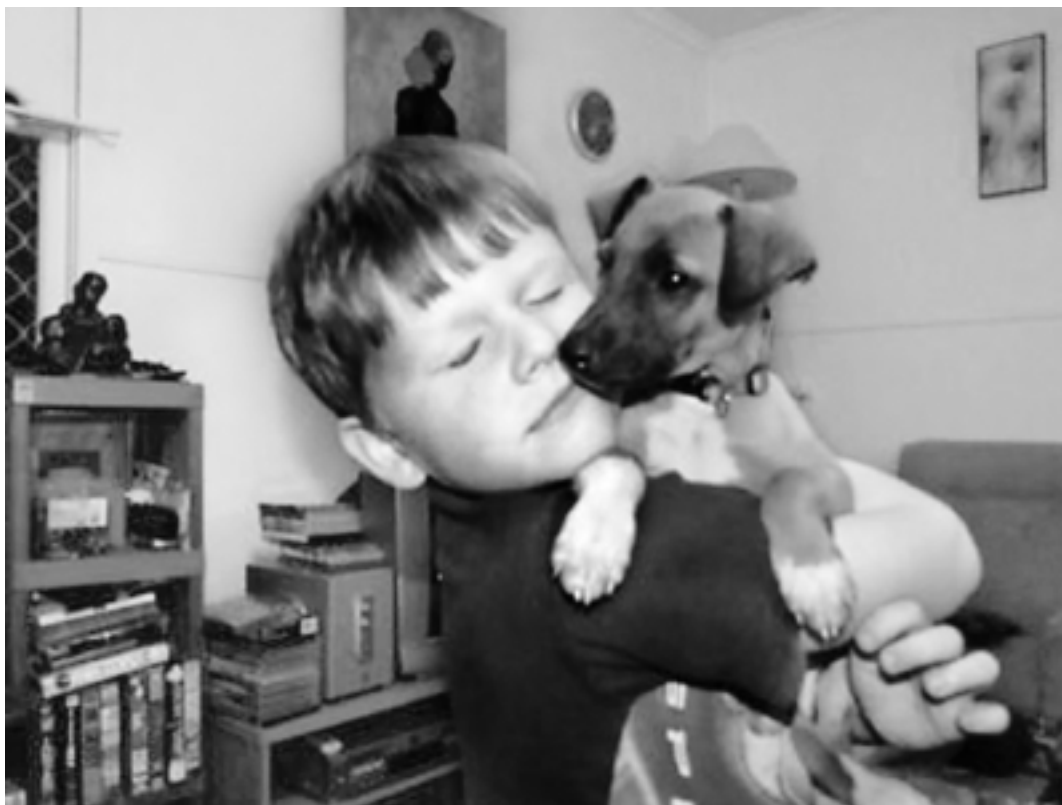
When the Big Day arrived, Demarco was required to be the first person to have contact with Chino as he was released from his crate at the airport, to secure a close bond (which was instantaneous) and he is in charge of providing all Chino’s care (under close supervision).

Chino’s gift became apparent within hours of their first meeting, when he was able to give a warning whine or nudge when Demarco’s level was dropping. At first Kate looked for any evidence to brush off Chino’s reactions as coincidence, but the numbers tell the story. Once Chino alerts, one need only look into his eyes to know that he isn’t happy until he sees Demarco eating. Once his sugar level has risen into the safe range, Chino will jump up on his chair and go to sleep.

Demarco and Kate’s quality of life has improved tenfold since Chino’s arrival. He is still in training to become an accredited Assistance Dog, however, he has every right to accompany Demarco and Kate anywhere except a licensed kitchen or an operating room.

Stay tuned ... the next issue of *The Whippet Watch* will explore the origins and training of these service dogs.

*Paws for Diabetics, Inc., is a charitable non-profit organization of dedicated volunteers, involved in the training



and placement of diabetic alert dogs in Australia.

An internet search turns up a few similar organizations in the United States also. Caution is advised—the internet is an amazing source of information, but is obviously open to legitimate professionals as well as the those which may be questionable. No one should expect to plunk down a sum of money and walk away with a dog perfectly trained and suited to their individual problem. Be sure to do your research!

– Linda

Linda Stone resides in Illinois with her family which includes four Whippets and one french bulldog. They participate in Whippet racing and conformation shows. ✦

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