

## UPDATES

# Service Dog Spotlight: Nichole and Mayer

*A vet's insightful diagnosis saves a much-loved member of the family.*

By Jeanne Roberts

*This is the first in an occasional series of slice-of-life stories about service dogs and the humans who depend on them.*

CLARKSVILLE, MARYLAND—Golden Retriever Mayer was born on June 10, 2007, and my daughter, Nicole Roberts, received Mayer from Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities (ECAD) in August of 2009.

Nicole has struggled with health issues since birth, having been born prematurely at one pound, 14 ounces, with two holes in her heart. After numerous surgeries while still a baby, Nicole became visually impaired and developed disabilities commonly seen with cerebral palsy. Service dog Mayer assisted Nicole in her fight to have a life with some independence and security. Mayer was trained to walk with her, giving Nicole stability and being there, when needed, to break her falls.

Mayer wore a balance harness and went to school with Nicole, helping her walk independently, from 2011 to 2018. In the spring of 2016, Nicole's high-school transition coordinator told us that Mayer was slowing down dramatically when walking with Nicole and we should begin discussing how to obtain her successor dog. Mayer turned 9 years old that June, and we had all started to notice he was aging.

We contacted Lu Picard, co-founder of

ECAD, and applied for Mayer's successor in August 2016. During the course of that summer and fall, we spoke with Lu a few times about Mayer's general health and how he was slowing down, especially on harness. In addition to suggesting supplements, Lu mentioned that she had a dog die unexpectedly from a ruptured spleen and that we might want to consider getting Mayer's spleen checked.

We discussed this with Mayer's primary vet. She didn't have the ability to do an ultrasound and referred him to an internal medicine vet in Annapolis for a spleen ultrasound. He was seen for his first ultrasound on January 10, 2017. This ultrasound showed a few (at least three) nodules within his spleen, the largest being 1.2 cm in diameter. The internal medicine vet recommended that Mayer be checked again within four to six weeks to determine if these masses were growing. On February 13, the follow-up ultrasound indicated that the masses had grown, and it was recommended that Mayer's spleen be removed.

At 9 years and 8 months old, Mayer had surgery to remove his spleen on February 28. Although the biopsy showed that these masses

were benign, the surgeon indicated that if the masses continued to grow the spleen could have ruptured and, additionally, with the spleen one can never be 100 percent sure that there isn't a malignancy. As a result, he also recommended that Mayer be followed up with an ultrasound every six months (looking for any abdominal abnormalities) and a chest X-ray every three months (looking for any abnormalities in the lungs) for the first year, which we did. Fortunately, nothing further was found.

After surgery, Mayer stayed in the hospital for three days until the afternoon of March 2. It was a very difficult recovery process for the first two weeks. Mayer looked miserable for many days and at the time we wondered if we had done the right thing by him. He had a stapled incision the

## About ECAD

The not-for-profit Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities, located in Torrington, Connecticut, was founded by Lu and Dale Picard in 1995 to educate and place service dogs with people with disabilities so they will have greater independence and mobility. For more information, visit [ecad1.org](http://ecad1.org), or visit ECAD on Facebook.



June 2018: Mayer retires after Nicole's last week of high school.

full length of his abdomen to his pelvic area. The surgeon warned us not to let him jump on any furniture or go up or down any stairs because if the staples came out, his insides would basically fall out. Talk about stressful!

So, for two weeks, we barricaded Mayer into the kitchen to ensure he didn't go down the single step into the family room or come upstairs to our bedrooms. We used his harness to help him out the front door and down the two steps to "get busy." It was a very nerve-racking time!

But recover he did, and within a couple weeks he began to feel better. His stitches came out two weeks later, on March 13, and shortly afterward he went back to work on harness with Nicole for another two-plus years! At 11 years old, Mayer retired when Nicole completed high school in June 2018. In August 2018, Nicole received her successor dog, Billy, from ECAD. Today Mayer is happily retired at 13.5 years old and gets along very well with his replacement.—**J.R.**

COURTESY JEANNE ROBERTS