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Community shoulders dog's medical bills

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Staff Writer

DELTONA -- Eagle limped over to his owner's side and laid his snout on the edge of Michael Ray's wheelchair.

The dog is finally home from an unusual shoulder surgery that brought strangers together. Ray's gentle brown eyes beam down at the fluffy golden retriever, his companion, his service dog who will open doors one day after completing training, even his connection to strangers afraid of approaching disabled people.

"He's such a part of my life that he's like my right arm," the 55-year-old said. "Anytime I go away and he's not with me it's like something's missing."

Ray tries to write thank you notes to those who helped him with Eagle, but there are so many people who raised nearly \$6,000 for surgery and other care.

Neighbors. The Publix manager. Veterinarians with big hearts. A local nonprofit. Strangers. Even famous NASCAR drivers.

Ray's legs became paralyzed after a man shot him in a road rage incident when he was 27. His wife died of cancer in 1999. And just months ago, the former AT&T employee who is now on Social Security disability had no idea how he was going to pay to fix Eagle's left leg as it went lame because of the shoulder problem. Veterinarians could not figure out what was wrong.

However, in late December 2005, veterinarian Jennifer Fick at the University of Florida read about a new diagnosis and procedure to treat the shoulders of dogs. The procedure would be new to the vets as well as expensive.

Then, a friend and manager at the Doyle Road Publix Supermarket told Ray about H.E.L.P. Animals Inc., an Orange City nonprofit that raises money for animal fire rescue masks and animals like Eagle.

The money H.E.L.P. Animals raised for Eagle from a yard sale and information on its Web site sparked the Tony Stewart Foundation to send a \$500 check. H.E.L.P. Animals went even further, raising thousands at a motorcycle run where other NASCAR memorabilia was auctioned off.

"I understand he's the bad boy of NASCAR, well he's a real pussycat when it comes to animals," Karen Clark, spokeswoman for H.E.L.P. Animals, said about NASCAR driver Stewart.

Then an anonymous stranger from Pennsylvania sent \$1,800. And Ray's Deltona neighbors gave \$970.

With his luck rolling, Ray decided to e-mail the vet who pioneered the shoulder procedure -- he feared the new procedure was too complicated for inexperienced hands.

"He's a service dog, not just a pet," he said.

Dr. Jimmy Cook at the University of Missouri took Ray's story to heart -- he didn't even charge a surgery fee, and he flew down to UF at the expense of H.E.L.P. Animals.



H.E.L.P. Animals Inc.
Michael Ray of Deltona sits with his dog, Eagle, for whom the Tony Stewart Foundation made a donation that helped the dog get special surgery in Gainesville.

"If we can use our talents and abilities to help people, that's what keeps you going and makes what you do worthwhile," Cook said by phone from Missouri.

But the story isn't over yet. Even though Eagle is home for recovery, he has to get physical therapy from Affiliated Veterinary Specialists in Maitland.

However, that won't stop Ray from his happiness and the overwhelming feeling he gets when he thinks about all who came together to help.

"Throughout my life, God's put special people in it," he said. "Just not so many at one time."

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