

Glynn County dog in the running for top service dog

Bronx, a German shepherd, alerts to 14-year-old boy's impending seizures

By Terry Dickson

BRUNSWICK | On Oct. 11, 2007, Chris Carswell had a seizure and a few years later a star was born.

The star is Bronx, a German shepherd service dog trained to detect Chris's seizures. Bronx has won the service dog category of the American Humane Association's Hero Dog Awards and is in the running for the organization's Top Dog.

A film crew was at Satilla Marsh Elementary Monday to recreate some of the activity when Chris had his first and nearly last seizure. His heart stopped at the school, and Glynn County EMTs brought him back.

Chris has had a number of seizures since then, his mother, Janet Carswell said, but "he had the one that ended his life here."

At least that life.

Chris said he was at lunch in the school cafeteria with his friend Eamon Maloney when he suddenly became tired.

"I was eating my spaghetti. I told him I was not feeling good. I was tired and was going to take a nap and to wake me up when we left. I laid my head down and that was it," Chris said.

He lost consciousness at the table, and the staff carried him to the school nurse's office and called 911. From there he was rushed by ambulance to Southeast Georgia Health System's Brunswick hospital. Wolfson's Children's Hospital sent up an ICU transport to take him to Jacksonville.

That's where he woke up seven hours after dozing off in the cafeteria.

The family got Bronx 2 1/2 years ago from Highland Canine Training in Harmony, N.C.

Asked how often Bronx has "worked" since he came into their family, Carswell said, "Many times. He gives us five to 15 minutes to prepare."

"It's like this constant whine, and he'll circle Chris. Then he'll try to nudge him to get him down on a piece of furniture," she said.

Other times, however, the reaction is more severe when Chris is in a situation that could compound the danger. Chris said that when Bronx sensed a seizure coming while he was in the pool, he bit down on his arm and tried to drag him out.

"He got you good that time," his mother said.

Director Dee Farmand and cinematographer Alice Gu, both of Los Angeles, were at the school Monday morning to make a video in preparation for the Oct. 5 Top Dog award in Hollywood. The public elected dogs from each category, including law enforcement/arson dogs, military dogs, search and rescue dogs, hearing dogs, guide dogs and others and will pick the best overall.

Bronx is also trained to search for Chris because some people, especially the young, don't want to be seen having a seizure and try to hide if they feel one coming on.

Part of the requirement for having a service dog is training, so they have to put Bronx through his search paces, Janet Carswell said.

"It takes him 2 1/2 minutes to find him. We've hidden him in buildings, even in a storage locker," and Bronx always find him, she said.

The film crew will record a series of scenes this week with Chris and Bronx as they will the other dogs.

In one scene, Gu lay on her back on a gurney with the camera trained up at Glynn County EMTs D.L. "Bronco" Broncato and James M. Ownbey and Principal Kathie Matthews. The camera served as Chris's eyes in the recreation. Matthews did what she did that day, calling "Chris, Chris" over and over and asking him to wake up.

As he does, Bronx lay stretched out next to Chris during much of the preparation looking a little bored. He goes everywhere with Chris, to movies, restaurants and sleeps beside his bed at night.

School for Chris is now at home because his frequent absences for medical reasons — including two-week stretches at Miami Children's Hospital twice a year — make it too hard for him to make up missed work, his mother said.

Those medical appointments are necessary because the reasons for his seizures remain undiagnosed, Janet Carswell said.

It was during one of those visits to Miami that Chris and Bronx got their first big notice. Bronx had gotten blood poisoning from being neutered and ended up in the hospital himself. A few days later he was curled up on with Chris on a bed at Miami Children's.

"Every time that gets on the Internet, it goes viral," his mother said.

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Photos

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Terry.Dickson@jacksonville.com Bronx licks Chris Carswell's face at Satilla Marsh Elementary, where Chris suffered a near fatal seizure in 2007. Bronx is Chris' service dog.

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Terry.Dickson@jacksonville.com - 8/5/13 - Cinematographer Alice Nu lies on her back on a gurney and films Glynn County EMTs James M. Ownby, left, and D.L. "Bronco" Broncato and Satilla Marsh Elementary Principal Kathie Matthews as they recreate the day Chris Carswell suffered a near fatal seizure at the school. Sound man Craig Frame of Brunswick is to the right. They were filming for a Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation on Hero Dogs, including Chris' service dog Bronx, a German Shepherd that alerts to his seizures. (Florida Times-Union, Terry Dickson)

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Terry.Dickson@jacksonville.com - 8/5/13 - Chris Carswell and Bronx, his service dog that alerts to his impending seizures. Bronx is in the running for the American Humane Association's Top Dog award. (Florida Times-Union, Terry Dickson)