



# COM-FORT DOGS

Golden Retrievers offer emotional support in difficult times.  
By Amy Hempe

Tobias comforts a child in Parkland, Florida.

PHOTOS COURTESY LUTHERAN CHURCH CHARITIES

**S**cheels All Sports, the newly opened recreational gear store in Johnstown, Colo., draws a decent number of people for a Tuesday morning. Local teens on spring break as well as families who've driven down from Cheyenne stroll the wide aisles surrounding the Ferris wheel in the store's center. Some shoppers amble while others look for specific items to buy. However, at some point, nearly all of them turn their heads to watch the Golden Retriever named Cubby who's also walking through the store, wearing a blue vest printed with the words "Pet me!"



"Would you like to pet her?" asks Bonnie Fear, one of Cubby's handlers. Invariably, the answer is "Yes!" Huge smiles spread across people's faces as they reach out to begin the snuggling.

Scheels is where Cubby, a comfort dog with Lutheran Church Charities (LCC) K9 Comfort Dog Ministry, goes to practice her skills. Her job is to remain calm while others pet her. The environments vary, and the people—who range in age from toddlers to the elderly—are almost always new and therefore strangers. Cubby welcomes them all.

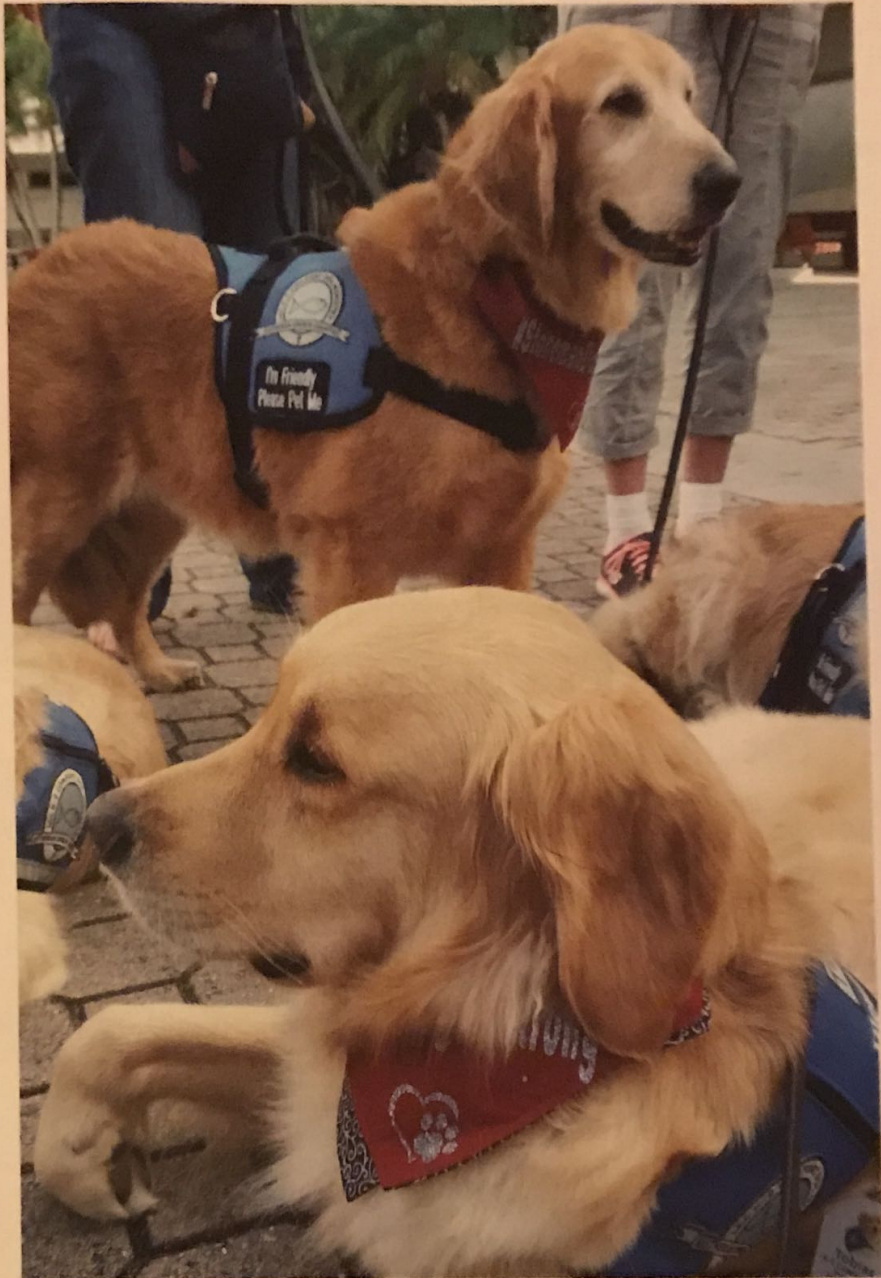
In the 10 years that LCC K9 Comfort Dog Ministry has been around, the U.S. has experienced a disturbing number of traumas, from floods affecting small towns to mass shootings that reverberate throughout the nation. The LCC's Golden Retrievers have become a recognized presence at many of them.

## COMFORT DOGS

"We never go where we are not invited," says Tim Hetzner, program director. With 130 dogs in 23 states, they have been asked to help survivors in the aftermath of shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, Pulse Orlando in Florida, the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, Marshall County High School in Kentucky and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The dogs have earned a positive reputation among reporters, first responders and law enforcement.

"The Florida Attorney General's office talked to the Parkland superintendent," Hetzner recalls. "They knew who we were from helping out in Orlando." Calls were made, and LCC Golden Retrievers from 10 states were dispatched, some by car, others by air. Similarly, FBI agents in Sutherland Springs were so impressed with how the local community responded to the comfort dogs that agents recommended them to local services in Kentucky.

When Parkland teens returned to school for classes after the February 2018 shooting, dogs awaited them at the front doors and were available for weeks to help them adjust to their new reality. For several days, students



Parkland, Fla.: Top, Barnabas (back) and Tobias (foreground) vested up and ready to work; below, the first full LCC Parkland team.



sent rapturous tweets about the dogs they encountered. As Connor Dietrich, a 17-year-old student, messaged when asked his feelings about the comfort dogs, “These dogs have helped more than any human could. They can like sense if you’re having a bad day and cuddle up to you and play with you till you feel better. They are the biggest asset to our healing.”

“We stay as long as they want us,” Hetzner says, noting that two LCC dogs continue to provide comfort to the Sandy Hook community five years after the tragic shootings there.

Unlike service dogs, who function as guide dogs or carry out specific tasks, comfort dogs do not perform any specialized services for the people who require them. Their job is simply to remain calm while being petted.

The LCC dogs are all Golden Retrievers from specific breeders. At the LCC Northbrook, Ill., facility, training begins at eight weeks, and the pups begin wearing their Comfort Dog vests at nine weeks, a sight that Hetzner assures us “is about as cute as you can imagine.” The puppies learn that when they’re wearing the vest, they must be focused. During the early training stages, the puppies wear their vests for short intervals, which are gradually extended.

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Top, Las Vegas, Nev.; Jacob was in demand after the October 2017 country music festival shooting. Bottom, Parkland; Cubby shares a quiet moment with a Stoneman Douglas High School parent.



# “The dogs are furry bridges. They open doors for us.”



By the end of training, when the dogs are between 12 and 18 months old, they will have logged 2,000 hours of training.

While all of the dogs live in homes with families, they are owned by LCC. Some dogs have as many as 10 handlers who can work with them, and they all return to the Illinois facility once a year for testing and evaluation of skills.

“They are trained to work with all ages,” Hetzner says. “They must handle loud noises so that they do not get startled. They must handle different environments.” Most importantly, they must handle people who have experienced a variety of traumas. Survivors often carry anxiety and stress, and the dogs need to be able to remain calm amid high tension.

“We want people to feel comfortable. When you pet a dog, your heart rate goes down,” Hetzner explains, referencing a 2013 statement by the American Heart Association. “We provide the type of atmosphere that allows people to relax with what they’re going through. Many times, people will talk to the dogs as if they are counselors.”

Bonnie Fear took Cubby to Las Vegas, where they attended vigils for the shooting victims and visited hospitals to comfort survivors.

“We have been to enough of these things to know how people will react. You see this smile, and people say ‘Ooh—a dog!’ There’s a warm feeling that comes over their faces. They come over and Cubby does her job.”

The LCC Golden Retrievers have received a fair amount of national attention, including being profiled by NBC news. Reporters recognize the dogs, as they have covered the various tragedies to which the dogs have been dispatched, and are delighted to run into them.

“Anderson Cooper is a fan,” Hetzner says, chuckling. “In Las Vegas, he made the driver of his news van stop immediately so he could jump out and greet the dogs.”

Despite this newfound fame, local communities remain the heartbeat of the mission.

“The dogs are furry bridges,” explains Fear. “They open doors for us. One woman in Fort Collins, Colo., saw us in a Verizon store. She came over to say that Cubby had worked with her mother in a nursing home, and how much it meant to her.” For her, the dogs are members of the community, and this kind of acknowledgment is the best part of the job. ❸

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