

Sophie's Journey to her Service Dog - Calla

Meet Sophie! Sophie is a vibrant, energetic, silly five-year-old. Sophie is the third of four sisters.

Sophie loves to travel, learn, play with her sisters and her friends. Sophie loves to go to Starbucks, give hugs and make everyone around her happy and feeling warm. But that's not the only things that identify Sophie. Sophie has been on a journey, along with the rest of her family! I'd like to share some of her journey so that you can understand her needs and disabilities just a bit more.

Sophie's journey started unlike most stories you may hear of children in need of a service dog.

June 25, 2017 Sophie, along with her three sisters and mother, were visiting Nashville, TN. It was supposed to be the last night of the visit, with the start of the return road trip in the morning. The family enjoyed some dinner after a day of fun at the Nashville Zoo and swimming in the pond.

But at 8:44pm on the evening of Sunday, June 25, the 911 call that would change our lives forever was placed. After minutes of looking for Sophie, calling her name with no response, the worst nightmare a mother could have happened. I, Sophie's mother, thought to check the pond, and it was there that I saw blonde hair floating at the top of the shallow water of the pond.

Rushing over, and pulling her limp body from the water, I thought it was over.

Being trained and retrained in CPR since the age of 13, it all came rushing back and instincts kicked in. The 911 call was placed, taking seven minutes for the ambulance to arrive, all while CPR was being performed. No response in all this time.

The amazing paramedics took over and Sophie was immediately rushed to the Vanderbilt Children's Hospital. That was the longest drive of our lives. What should have been an average 45-minute drive took 23 minutes!

We arrived at the hospital and were greeted by amazing staff ready to take action. It was not until six days later that we knew that Sophie had truly survived. And after only eight days in the PICU, Sophie was released with no infections nor medications! Sophie was the first ever drowning victim (she was under water 6-7 minutes, without oxygen for approximately 4 minutes) to enter the hospital in her condition, to be able to walk out and no seen issues. But this was all just the beginning of our journey.

After returning to New York, and monitoring Sophie's progress, it soon became clear that she was not back to normal. About a month after the initial accident, the seizures began. At first we didn't even know she was having seizures! Absence Seizures are not always easy to recognize, and being that we didn't expect them, we didn't even know to look out for them. After discussing with Sophie's neurologist, and explaining that we thought she was having nightmares and her strange activity during the night, we were informed of the possibilities of seizures. Soon after we learned

to recognize them, and the next step was noticing three to four seizures daily! And that is when the neurologist informed us that Sophie has epilepsy. We assumed she would take some medication and all would be good. But of course that's not how it all worked.

As a family, we are very aware that we may not be able to stop the seizures from happening, or even do much about them. But knowing that with every seizure there is a greater chance for more brain damage and more complications, is a constant struggle.

This is where our plea to YOU comes in! Sophie is now struggling with Epilepsy, Migraines, memory loss/learning disabilities, sever allergies and severe asthma. The amazing work of a Service Dog will help alert Sophie, and us, to seizures so that we can help her recover more quickly and guide her in the right behaviors. But this does not come easy, nor cheap. The average service dog costs between \$25,000-\$50,000 to raise and train, and in most cases will cost the family in need about \$20,000. This now means that WE, Sophie's family, needs to raise approximately \$20,000 so that Sophie can have a much safer and fulfilling childhood. And that we can have a more relaxed environment, not having to jump every time she moves, wondering if she is having a seizure. It's hard when every time your child moves to have to be hyper vigilant and constantly seem like you're staring at them. Always asking if they are ok and constantly worrying when the next seizure will happen? where will we be, driving, playing, sleeping, eating, the possibilities are endless when seizures can occur. Seizure as with most things, being stressed, tired, sick or upset can cause them to flare up. Having a service dog will help to reduce anxiety and stress, thus helping to reduce seizure activity. Having the ability to have advance notice of seizure activity, even if it's a few minutes, is priceless. Just enough notice to sit down or a safe place so that you don't fall and get hurt. It will be nice having a sense of relief when Sophie is sleeping, knowing Calla is there watching over her.

Since the initial quest looking for a service dog, we came across New Hope Assistance Dogs in Warren, PA. We sent in an application and set up a visit for a meet and greet. There we met Calla, a poodle, training to become a service dog. Sophie and Calla hit it off right away and we started to work on team training. Since, Calla has come to stay with our family, while we are continuing to work with her training. We can't even begin to say what a difference that Calla has made in Sophie's life. When Sophie gets anxiety or anxious, Calla knows exactly what to do. Calla comes and sits by Sophie and helps to calm her down. While we are in a store you will notice Calla starting to nudge Sophie. In a few minutes you will notice Sophie being anxious and wanting to sit down and hug Calla. In just a short time the difference we have experienced with Calla present is monumental. We can't wait to see what the future holds for Sophie and Calla.

Any donation towards Sophie and Calla would be greatly appreciated.

Shmuelly and Devorah Levitin