

Therapy dog gives Bryan boy comfort, support

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Koleton McCandless poses with his therapy dog, Townie, at his family's home in Bryan on Aug. 13. Townie is a 2½-year-old yellow lab from The Ability Center's Assistance Dog Program.

- Photo by Jonathan LeBlanc



Koleton McCandless and Townie, Koleton's therapy dog, cuddle on a couch.

- Photo courtesy of Ashley McCandless

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Koleton McCandless plays outside with his therapy dog, Townie, at his home in Bryan on Aug. 13.

- Photo by Jonathan LeBlanc

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Koleton McCandless has his therapy dog, Townie, give him a handshake for a treat outside of their house in Bryan on Aug. 13. This is one of several commands Koleton has taught Townie since getting her on June 2.

- Photo by Jonathan LeBlanc

When Jackie Curl beeped her car horn outside of Ashley and Koleton McCandless' house on June 2, Koleton, 11, was confused.

“He came out and was like, ‘What’s going on?’” said Curl, Koleton’s grandma.

Curl explained to Koleton that he was having a parade, which was occurring two days before his birthday, and she was there to take pictures of the parade.

But what Koleton didn't know Curl was going to take pictures of was him and his early birthday present — a 2½-year-old yellow lab named Townie.

“He was excited because we kept it from him,” Curl said. “And he didn't know it until I came.”

And Townie isn't just a normal dog — she's a therapy dog.

Which Koleton needs.

“He was born with half of his cerebellum missing,” Curl said. “And a year ago, when he had his last MRI, it showed it's shrinking, getting smaller.”

The cerebellum is the part of the brain that allows for cognitive skills like speech, emotional behavior, maintaining balance and coordination, Curl and Ashley, Koleton's mom, said.

With half of his cerebellum missing, Koleton can't use his cognitive skills as much as other kids his age.

However, Ashley said Koleton's doctors say he's doing better than they'd expect for someone with his condition.

“They’re actually amazed on how good he’s doing,” Ashley said. “It’s more like a genetic rare brain condition. To get the actual diagnosis, we’d have to get a genetics test — and that’s very expensive. So we haven’t done that yet.”

But Koleton, who’s in fifth grade, always had taken to Ike, one of Bryan Elementary’s former school therapy dogs. He gravitated toward Ike since sometimes “he has a hard time with his emotions,” according to Ashley.

That led Ashley to apply in early January for a therapy dog through The Ability Center’s Assistance Dog Program, which provides service, therapy and school therapy dogs to help “individuals with disabilities achieve greater independence,” according to website for The Ability Center, based in Sylvania.

“We mostly place these dogs with children and adults with developmental disabilities,” said Mallory Crooks, public relations manager at The Ability Center. “It’s usually younger kids. Basically, Koleton’s age is perfect to get a therapy dog because she provides support when he gets home to make sure that home is a safe space for him.”

The family got approved and matched with Townie and initially expected to take her home in April.

However, they didn't get to take Townie home until June 2, after training was pushed back because of the coronavirus pandemic. The training consisted of a week online and two days in person.

"He couldn't have been matched with a sweeter dog," Ashley said. "She is perfect. She fit in so fast. It's like we've had her forever."

In order to get Townie, though, Ashley had to raise money to pay for her.

They did, by selling T-shirts with "the bravest person you can be is yourself" written on the front. People wore those shirts to Koleton's surprise parade.

"A lot of people wore those shirts, so they were getting out of the car and taking a picture with him and his shirt," Ashley said, "because we were going to do it at the school, and we were going to have everybody wear them at school and get a picture ...

“People were bringing presents, which we really didn’t expect. It was just going to be a wave, but people brought presents, cards and then they got out.”

And Koleton got everything he wanted.

“What’d he say when he was opening presents? ‘I wanted this,’” Curl said. “And then you were getting a lot of money out of your cards and you’d say, ‘I’m rich..’

“I don’t think we can top that one.”

After the parade, Townie and Koleton began a companionship — which was easy with Townie’s “very loving” and “caring” personality, according to Ashley.

“She doesn’t meet a stranger, let’s put it that way,” Curl said. “She loves everybody. She’s calm when she needs to be calm, and she’s kind of rowdy.”

Koleton said he and Townie like playing hide-and-seek, snuggling, dressing Townie in camouflage, teaching her new commands and outdoor activities, including having Townie sit and stay. Koleton

said he likes to have Townie walk to another side of the yard and then Koleton calls for her to come chase after him.

“The hide-and-seek is actually really cute because she’ll stay in the other room and he’ll go hide and call her,” Ashley said. “And then she’ll go find him. He’ll hide underneath a blanket and call her name, and she’ll paw at the blanket to find him.

“It’s really cute.”

Townie provides Koleton with emotional support.

“If he’s having a bad day, she’s going to help him through the day just like a companionship,” Ashley said. “Like a relationship, best buddy.”

And just two months into Koleton and Townie’s companionship, Curl has seen the immense positive impact.

“It’s really helping him,” Curl said. “I recommend anyone that’s got disabilities to get a (therapy) dog — especially if they’re (dogs) like Townie.”

Townie can also travel to school with Koleton, but because he's only going to school part-time now due to the pandemic, Townie isn't traveling with him there.

In the future, however, Ashley can see Townie coming with Koleton on test days since Koleton gets anxiety with tests.

But for now, Koleton will get plenty of time with Townie at home — time filled with hide-and-seek, snuggles and playing outside.

"I love you, Townie," Koleton said, snuggling her.