

Great Danes are helping all kinds of people find their balance in life.

By Mara Bovsun

Eve Dahl is a pretty 10-year-old with a bright smile, but she has a condition—*osteogenesis imperfecta* or brittle bone disease—that made her feel uncomfortable going out in public.

That changed when Finnegan, Finn for short, came into her life in January 2017, says her mother, Deborah Dahl.

Dahl says that Eve used to think that people were staring at her wheelchair. Now, Eve says that they are “looking at my cool dog.”

That “cool dog” is a black and white Great Dane, who, at 155 pounds, is more than four times Eve’s weight.

To outsiders, they may look like an odd couple, but they are a perfect fit.

Finn is Eve’s balance buddy, a living, breathing, furry cane. With Finn by her side, Eve confidently takes swimming and dance lessons, sells lemonade at a curbside stand, goes trick-or-treating, and participates in all kinds of activities that put the joy in childhood.

He’s with her, always, waiting poolside to give her a kiss after a swim, to help her with rehabilitation after surgery, or to guide her when walking through a crowd.

“I feel like he’s made me stronger, so I can do a lot more things,” Eve told FD in a phone interview.

Eve was about 6 months old when she was diagnosed with the condition. By her 10th birthday, her mother estimates she had experienced roughly 100 bone breaks, although she admits she stopped counting at 75. Eve has also endured a dozen surgeries.

Lean



on Me



Finn helps Eve navigate stairs, which would not be possible without him. Follow the "Chronicles of Eve and Finn" at facebook.com/onegoodthing1.

Over the years, Dahl says she often considered a service dog, but none that she saw seemed right.

Then, in early 2016, Dahl was watching TV coverage of the AKC National Championship and a "light bulb went off." There was a ceremony for the 2015 Awards for Canine Excellence. The recipients in the service-dog category were Bella Burton, 11, and George, a huge Great Dane. Bella has Morquio syndrome, which impedes growth and impairs mobility.

"I saw the videos of them walking, and I said to myself, 'Oh my gosh, she walks like Eve,'" Dahl recalls.



TV coverage of Bella and George showed Eve's mom how a service dog could help her child.

She quickly contacted the organization that paired Bella and George, the nonprofit Service Dog Project (SDP), in Ipswich, Massachusetts (servicedogproject.org).

Grand, Goofy, or Both?

When Carlene White, 80, SDP founder, first proposed the idea of using Great Danes, she was met with skepticism. The breed's popular image, created in part by cartoon characters like Brad Anderson's Marmaduke, is of a sweet-tempered oversized goof, perpetually knocking things down with his basketball-star limbs and platter paws.

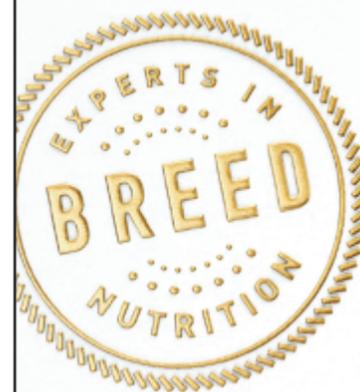
Don't forget, "Ruh-Roh," the ultimate canine expression for "my bad," was first uttered by a Great Dane—Astro, the pet of a space-age family on early 60s cartoon classic *The Jetsons*. The same voice actor later introduced it to a new generation in *Scooby-Doo*.



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TOP LEFT: COURTESY DEBORAH DAHL; TOP RIGHT: ©AKC

Dane Facts

Origin: Despite the name, these dogs are not from Denmark, but from Germany.

Named For: The name is thought to have come from an old French designation, *Grand Danois*, which means big Danish. They've also been called the German Mastiff and German Boarhound.

Famous Owners: Movie goddess Jayne Mansfield, TV's Batman Adam West

State of the Bark: The Great Dane was named Pennsylvania's state dog in 1965.



Engraving of Boarhounds from *Sporting magazine*, 1808. H.B. Chalon (painter); H.R. Cook (engraver)

White had been running an animal talent agency for more than three decades when she decided to go in a new direction. Her father had had Parkinson's disease, and she had long thought about applying her training skills to service-dog work. She became an accredited member of Assistance Dogs International and began building her program, consulting with an influential Great Dane breeder, Laura Kiaulenas, of BMW Kennels, to establish a breeding line.

Since its founding in 2003, SDP has placed more than 165 Great Danes with children and adults who have such mobility disorders as Parkinson's, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, Friedreich's ataxia, and other conditions that make it hard to get around.

The dogs cost about \$20,000 to train, but they are provided free of charge to people who need and qualify for them. SDP's round-the-clock puppy cams (<https://tinyurl.com/y87erbtr>) allow outsiders to look in on how these budding helpers are raised.

From the Heights

In Germany, which is where they originated (not Denmark as the name would imply), the Great Dane's main job was hunting savage European boar and other large game, work requiring size, strength, and smarts. Fanciers developed a breed worthy of the nickname the "Apollo of dogs," huge (males should be 32 inches or more at the shoulder), but

balanced and agile, with a courageous and dependable temperament.

In the modern world, these qualities have placed Great Danes among the most popular canine companions—14th in the 2017 AKC breed rankings—despite the challenges posed by living with a dog who is about the size of a pony. Good manners are essential, says breeder Cynthia Neet, who bred and co-owns Zephyr, Best of Breed at the 2018 Westminster Kennel Club dog show.

"Since Great Danes are so giant, it is even more important that they are well-trained," she says. She recommends a minimum of obedience classes that aim toward AKC Canine Good Citizen titles. Neet also encourages her puppy buyers to

enter a few dog shows.

"The dog show is a wonderful environment to train puppies and socialize puppies with people as well as other dogs," she says. Vendors, spectators, noisy children, all kinds of breeds, and dog-savvy participants offer a kaleidoscope of intense, but controlled, stimuli.

"The puppies receive a positive human experience, every single time," Neet says. "This is very important for a Great Dane puppy."

Danes are eager and eye-catching competitors in other dog sports—obedience, agility, and even barn hunt, which

requires them to navigate through tunnels and hay bales. Their sensitivity makes them wonderful therapy dogs and helps in their service-dog work.

"Mobility issues are one

Beauty and Brains: Baby Sarah is a Grand Champion, but also has titles in rally, tricks, and CGC.



of the main reasons that people reach out for Great Danes” as service dogs, says Neet. “They are big and can handle the weight of being leaned on.”

For balance work, White says dogs need to be at least 45 percent of the height and 65 percent of the weight of the person they will be assisting.

The height of Bella Burton’s George was one of the first things that struck Dahl when she saw the team on TV. In a flash, she understood why she never envisioned other breeds working for her child.

They were too short.

Eve needed something to help her stand upright, which neither smaller dogs nor conventional mobility aids could do. When she used a walker, for example, she would lean forward onto her elbows because of her weak forearms. But with Finn, she rests her hand on his back, using her stronger upper arms for support. Finn’s height allows Eve to stand tall.

Never Alone

The Great Dane’s imposing appearance is another giant asset. “Great Danes are so noble (when not sitting on your lap) and majestic. Very impressive,” says Neet.

The breed’s size alone can be enough to deter a troublemaker.

“I wanted a dog that when I walked alone on the beach at night, a bad person would

Matchmaking

Part of the process of getting an SDP Dane involves volunteering at the 12-acre farm where the dogs are raised. This allows SDP staff to observe the applicant, and for the people to learn about life with such a huge animal. Sometimes the SDP staff can make the match, but often it’s a matter of canine intuition. Bella’s voice, movement, and posture made most dogs shy away, says SDP master trainer Megan Kokaras in a video on the organization. Bella and her

family volunteered for more than a year before one dog, George, accepted a treat from her, and they clicked.



Eve had a similar experience.

She was offering the Danes cookies; most took it and walked off. Then Finn started watching and following her. It was soon evident to everyone that Finn had found his life’s work, says Dahl.

think twice before approaching me,” says Neet, who has been showing and breeding Danes since 2000. “A Great Dane on high alert is not welcoming.”

She got started in the breed when she went college and had to downsize from her first love, horses. Danes were the closest thing to a

U.S. Air Force veteran Scott Aubin also saw the uncanny way the dogs make their choice. Like many veterans, Aubin had both physical and emotional problems when he returned to civilian life. After a suicide attempt, he was sent to a retreat for help. There he met a counselor who had a balance dog, Wicked, an SDP Dane.

Aubin arranged to volunteer at the farm. During one visit, a trainer asked him for some help with a dog, Dash, who was afraid of men. The trainer asked Aubin to just talk around the dog to help her get used to a male voice.

He walked into the kennel where Dash was sitting in a corner alone, dropped a biscuit on the floor, stepped into an adjoining room and sat on a couch. A few moments later, Dash showed up at the door with the biscuit in her mouth and sauntered over to where Aubin was seated. “She put her head on my shoulder and dropped the biscuit on my lap,” he says. “That was the moment that changed my life.” With Dash’s help, Aubin pulled himself together.



Aubin and Dash

He now helps other veterans who are having trouble adjusting after their military service.

horse she could find.

Finn’s size gives Eve confidence to go out in the world. She’s so small that she could easily be overlooked in a crowd. If someone jostled her by accident, she could fall and be seriously injured.

No one can miss her with Finn by her side.

“I feel like I don’t need my mom as much. I’m more comfortable without my mom because I know Finn will protect me,” Eve says.

One incident drove home the change Finn had made in the lives of the Dahl family. About a year ago, Eve’s sister was in a cheerleading competition.



From Tiny Acorns: This little puppy, Zephyr, grew up to become a top show dog.

At one point, Dahl, Eve, and Finn found themselves in a packed hallway and were separated. Dahl could not see her daughter amid the flock of cheerleaders.

Before Eve got her service dog, an incident like this would have set both mother and daughter into a panic. But not this time.

“People had gotten between Eve and I, but she wasn’t worried, and I wasn’t worried,” says Dahl. “She had Finn.” **FD**

Visit [The Great Dane Club of America \(gdca.org\)](http://TheGreatDaneClubofAmerica.org) for information about health issues, sporting events, reputable breeders, and rescue. It also has a Facebook page (search “Great Dane Club of America.”)

Great Danes come in an array of colors—fawn (left), brindle (right), blue, black, and striking black-and-white patterns known as “harlequin” or “mantle.”



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