



A dog for Daniel: Local boy with autism receives a life-changing gift

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GODFREY - After a year of rigorous fundraising, one local family was given a life-changing gift.

Eleven-year-old **Daniel Salvato** of Godfrey has autism. His condition affects the entire Salvato family in various ways. They replaced their white picket fence with a privacy fence six feet tall, because Daniel Salvato could climb over the former. The entire home is rigged with alarms. Daniel Salvato has been known to elope in the night, which causes the family to worry. Their home is located near railroad tracks and the constantly trafficked Humbert Road. He does not sleep in his own bed, too plagued by separation anxiety to be away from the rest of his family, especially his mother. Now, thanks to the generosity of several local businesses and members of the community, the Salvatos can breathe a bit easier.

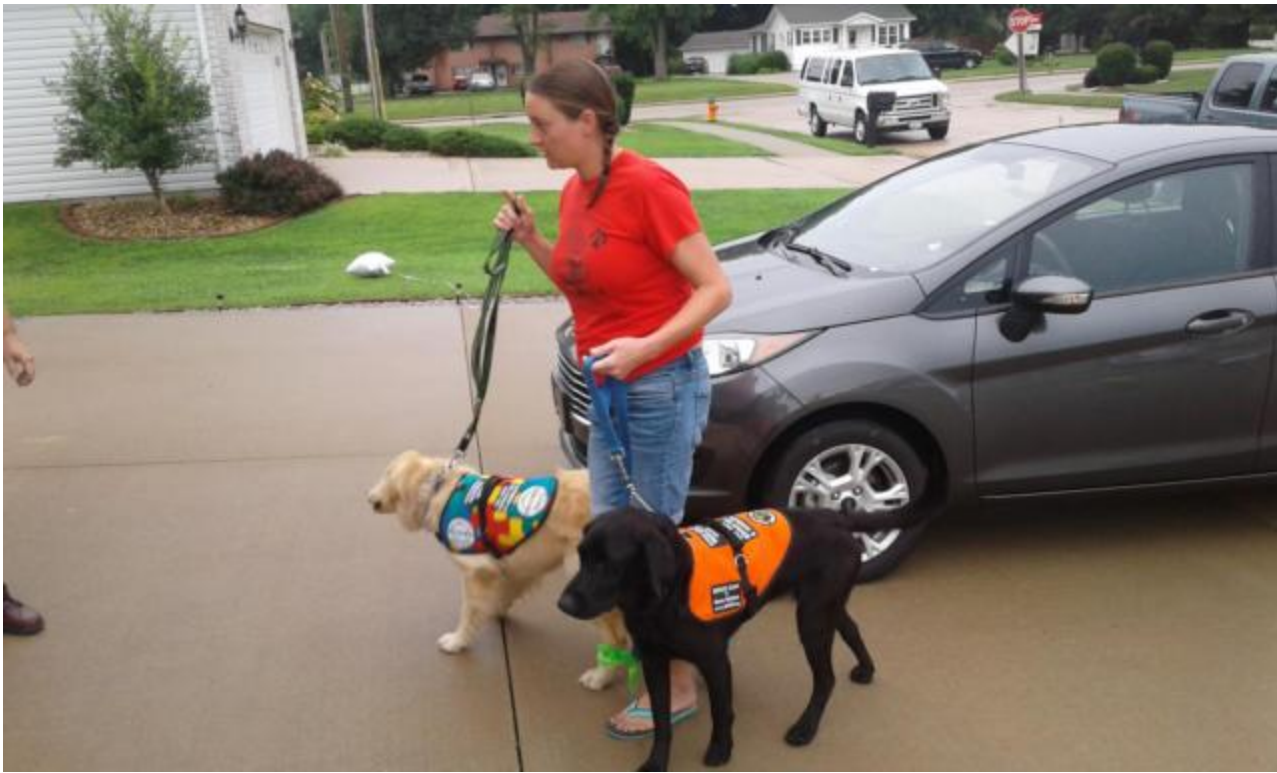
Wags, a nearly one-year-old golden retriever from **Service Dogs by Warren Retrievers** (SDWR) was delivered to the Salvatos early Friday morning by **SDWR Senior Trainer Erin Gray**. Gray will stay with the family for three to four days as she specializes Wags's training to be a perfect fit for Daniel Salvato. Wags is an autism service dog.

People with autism can benefit greatly from the company of a well-trained service dog Gray and Daniel Salvato's mother, **Penny Salvato**, said. They said Wags could help alert the family to Daniel Salvato eloping, elevate his confidence in public situations and possibly even increase his vocabulary.

"I'll come back every few months to help with training and be available for the family practically 24/7 between those," Gray said. "We train dogs for **autism, diabetes, PTSD** and **seizure**. The diabetes and seizure dogs are alert dogs. The autism and PTSD dogs help with meltdowns, elopement, keeping people at a distance and finding people who need to be alerted, such as the child, the mother and the father."

SDWR is a non-profit agency, which allows all their service dogs to be purchased through fundraising efforts. The Salvato family raised \$25,000 for Wags, including a \$7,500 grant from SDWR.

"We don't believe anyone should have to pay for their service dog," Gray said.



Penny Salvato said the money came from several sources. She attained donations from businesses such as the **Round Table** in Godfrey and **Roma's Pizza** in Bethalto. She collected change in jars left around the River Bend as well as her hometown of **Staunton**. She said she even begged for money.

"I would ask people nice the first time and tell them I would ask nicely first and then they would give me the money," she said, laughing. "Then I said if I didn't get it the first time, I would keep bothering them and bothering them until they gave me some."

According to the profile for Daniel Salvato on SDWR's website, sdwr.org, Wags will be extremely beneficial for him. Gray described the moment as "absolutely life-changing" for the family. Following is a portion of the family's donor drive page explaining the need for Wags.

Communication and social skills are two areas that are the biggest challenge for Daniel. He is not able to hold a conversation and can only answer simple questions. He does a lot of scripting. Unless you know the meanings behind his scripts, it is not helpful. He is also able to share information on animals. It is amazing the information he knows and shares in this specific area. We are hoping to reduce his anxiety and allow him to progress with communication and social skills. Public outings are a focus for us, but the challenges that strangers hold since they are new and unpredictable hold him back from functioning more independently.

Daniel also has challenges with behavior and separation anxiety. Both of these issues limit his independence and his ability to learn. His separation anxiety impacts him so much that he does not sleep by himself. Our primary goal is to assist Daniel to achieve his maximum level of independent functioning while being safe and happy. We do our best to allow him the freedom to explore his environment while maintaining his safety and removing barriers. So many times Daniel is judged by his behavior and actions since there are no visible indicators of Autism. Daniel responds very quickly the emotions and "energy" others project. The awareness of others that a service dog would provide would help tremendously to stop these rushes to judgement. We don't want pity for Daniel, but simple kindness and understanding.



Gray also brought another service dog to the home named Rocky. Rocky is destined for an 11-year-old with Type I diabetes in California, where Gray is going next before returning to **Madison, Virginia** where SDWR is headquartered.