

# Docs delay payment to help quadriplegic's companion

*Chocolate Lab can now resume place at friend's side*

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Photos



It was just a routine day at the dog park - until Ken Quilici's affectionate chocolate Lab collapsed onto the grass, breathless.

Quilici, who is quadriplegic as a result of a spinal injury he suffered at age 16, was horrified. Losing his 11-year-old dog Duke would mean losing a life companion and caregiver - not just a pet.

"He couldn't get any air out," Quilici, 37, recalled, sitting in the waiting room at Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center.

Duke has been there for Quilici when he needs a light switch flipped, a phone fetched or just a buddy to hang out with. He has served as a social icebreaker for those hesitant to approach and befriend someone with a disability. Quilici trained Duke himself at age 2.

"It's a huge void when he's not around," Quilici said, holding back tears.

After rushing to the Vet Center, it was determined the dog was suffering from a rare disorder called Laryngeal Paralysis, which meant the parts of the throat that open to let air come into the lungs had become paralyzed. Veterinarians explained the dog would need surgery, noting it would be expensive, considering few vets are trained in the practice.

As luck would have it, just weeks after the diagnosis, Quilici was laid off from his job selling medical supplies, along with 15 percent of the company.

"It was a curveball," he said, and those were two of the hardest weeks of his life.

Getting laid off meant he couldn't afford the surgery, which would set him back more than \$3,000. It meant he and Duke could no longer go on their daily outings, since getting excited was a big risk with the dog's disorder.

"When you can't pant, you overheat," explained Bishop Ranch veterinarian James Delano. "It's like going from breathing through a garden hose to breathing through a straw."

Delano, who has witnessed the bond between the man and dog for more than 10 years, said he used to see them around town. But after the diagnosis, he noticed they were no longer out and about.

"He realized the condition was affecting the quality of life for both of them," said Tracey Quartaroli, spokeswoman for the vet center.

The doctor then tried to get the surgery done at a discount.

Last week, the surgery was completed at cost value for about \$2,000, with the understanding that Quilici would be billed when he can raise enough money to pay for the surgery. Quilici and the Vet Center are now reaching out to the community for monetary donations.

Where Duke used to suck and heave loudly for even a puff of air, he now breaths fluidly. The larynges in his throat are permanently opened. Before the surgery, one could hear every laborious breath. Now, although Duke has lost his ability to bark, he can breathe and move much more easily.

In a back room of the vet center, Quilici's face lit up at the first sight of his dog after the surgery. Duke had tired droopy eyes from going under the knife and sniffed around slowly, slightly clumsily from medication. His neck was shaven from the procedure but he wagged his tail at the sight of his owner.

"It's like night and day," Quilici said after the dog had been home a few days.

Service dogs are generally Labradors and provide assistance to physically disabled people by opening and closing doors, pulling wheelchairs, helping dress and undress them and more, according to Dogs for the Disabled. The dogs aid people with physical disabilities and often a deeply emotional connection grows between the owner and the dog, who rely on each other for survival and companionship.

"They have a sense of compassion and they understand your abilities," said Quilici, who gets around in an electric wheelchair.

To contribute to the surgery cost, send donations by check to Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center with the word "Duke" in the notes section of the check. Mail to 2000 Bishop Drive, San Ramon 94583.