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COVER PHOTO BY TRACY SPISAK, GALLERY PORTRAITURE

WestEnd Neighbors

AN EXCLUSIVE MAGAZINE FOR THE RESIDENTS OF WESTERN SHAWNEE & LENEXA

FOR THE LOVE OF CHARLIE:

ADAM SMITH IS
ON A MISSION TO
CHANGE LIVES IN
THE NAME OF HIS
SERVICE DOG



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FEATURE

A LIFE-SAVING BOND BECOMES
A MISSION TO HELP OTHERS:
**CHARLIE'S
CALL TO DUTY**

BY NIKKI SWARTZ

PHOTOS BY TRACY SPISAK, GALLERY PORTRAITURE

Adam Smith can't remember exactly how many times Charlie saved his life during the 11 years they were together. But he knows for certain that he wouldn't be here today without his beloved service dog.

Charlie passed away from old age last January, leaving Adam to face the loss of not only his service dog, but also his constant companion and lifeline. In his grief, Adam thought of a way to honor Charlie's memory while giving others the same companionship and security that Charlie had given him. That mission has become the foundation for a nonprofit he is starting in Charlie's name: Charlie's Call to Duty.

Adam's journey with Charlie began after a devastating attack in Chicago in 2015. While walking home from the train, Adam was brutally assaulted by a stranger, knocked unconscious and left in a coma for two weeks. He suffered traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries, and his memory of the attack remains extremely limited.

The aftermath changed nearly every part of his life. Adam struggled with seizures, PTSD, anxiety, depression, agoraphobia and isolation. He spent years in physical, speech, occupational and aquatic therapy, and it took more than two years before he could begin functioning independently again.

Then Charlie came into his life.

At the time, Adam was experiencing several seizures a day. Charlie was trained to alert him to an approaching seizure, help keep him safe and, if necessary, get help. At first, Adam says, he didn't realize how profoundly a service dog would change his life. But that became clear the first time Charlie saved him.

"He alerted me and then responded by pressing an emergency call button," Adam recalls. "Then he laid under my head until my seizure stopped. I was very much still out of it and thankfully home at the time, but he still made sure that I was okay."

When paramedics arrived, Adam says they were stunned by how quickly Charlie had recognized the emergency and called for help.

"He saved my life many times over the 11 years he was with me," Adam says. "Losing him was truly one of my darkest days."

Even in his final years, Charlie refused to stop doing the job he had been trained to do. Although Adam believed he should have retired several years earlier, Charlie continued to take care of him until the very end.

Charlie may no longer be by his side, but Adam hopes to turn his love and devotion into something bigger than the two of them. Through Charlie's Call to Duty, he hopes to carry forward the legacy of a dog who spent his life protecting and serving his human. The nonprofit will help people with disabilities whose lives could be transformed by a service dog, while also giving shelter dogs with the potential to serve a second chance at life.

A BOND OF SUPPORT AND RESPECT

Adam says he and his partner, J. Mata, met through mutual friends "many moons ago," and it was Mata's British accent that first caught his attention. Over time, their relationship grew into a partnership built on shared interests, mutual support and a deep commitment to helping others – both people and animals.

The two bond over their love of dogs, true crime and shows about airlines, cruise ships and trains. But most important, Adam says, Mata sees him for who he is rather than defining him by his disability.

"He makes sure that wherever we go, I'm seen as a person like everyone else, not just a disability," Adam says. "He stands up for me and demands that I get the same respect that everyone else gets. He's caring and supportive of me and my passion for helping shelter dogs find new homes."

That support has been especially important as Adam's disability has made traditional employment difficult. Born and raised in Lee's Summit, Missouri, Adam attended Lee's Summit High School before studying retail management and development at the International Academy of Design and Technology in Chicago. His career included positions with luxury retailers including Abercrombie & Fitch, Coach, Victoria's Secret, Sephora and the LVMH Group. After returning to Kansas City in 2018, he worked for a home automation company, designing and selling smart-home systems for multimillion-dollar homes. Eventually, however, his disability made it impossible to continue.

Mata, who moved from the United Kingdom to the United States when he was 10, earned his undergraduate degree at UCLA and a graduate degree at the University of Miami. He was living in Las Vegas when he met Adam, and after many years dating long-distance, Mata moved to Kansas in 2025.



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Today, he is self-employed as a consultant and co-owns Matalogion, a hospitality firm that helps hotel and restaurant owners rebuild from the ground up and develop distinctive concepts. Adam says the slower pace of the Midwest has gradually grown on Mata, and his 12-hour work days keep him busy.

Mata's passion for hospitality is matched by his desire to help those in need. He often provides food, water and shelter to people experiencing homelessness, believing everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Mata is also an avid football – or “futbol” – fan, rarely missing a Premier League game, and an aviation enthusiast who can identify aircraft simply by sight.

For Adam, stepping away from traditional employment created an opportunity to devote himself to a lifelong passion: helping shelter dogs find homes. He works with shelters across the country, networking dogs in need of adopters or fosters and helping them find loving homes. He recently helped save several dogs from euthanasia at Dallas Animal Services.

The work is bittersweet.

“It brings me a lot of joy helping these innocent animals find a loving home, but also a lot of emotional pain knowing that I cannot help all of them,” Adam says.

ADAM'S PACK

Adam and Mata's family includes three beloved dogs: Suki Jayne, a five-year-old pit bull mix they adopted four years ago; London Anne Marie, Adam's 17-month-old service dog; and their newest addition, Jonas – or “JoJo” – a 14-month-old shepherd mix.

London joined the family about a year before Charlie passed away. She had completed much of her service dog training but had not yet graduated from scent detection when she was called upon to step into Charlie's role beside Adam.

Charlie had met London, and he also played an unexpected part in bringing Suki home. About nine months after Adam's beloved dog Loki died of cancer, Adam took Charlie to KC Pet Project to find a new companion. Charlie wasn't interested in the dog they initially met, and Adam was preparing to leave disappointed when Charlie suddenly stopped at another kennel, laid down and refused to move. So Adam asked to meet the dog inside.

It was Suki.

“Charlie picked his new sister, but the shocking part was that she looked almost identical to Loki,” Adam says. “He was playful with Suki in a way I had not seen before. To this day, I believe he knew it wasn't Loki, but the resemblance was just striking and matched her coloring and markings so closely.”

Suki quickly became a loving, cuddly member of the family who wants to be part of everything.

JoJo came into their lives through Adam's rescue work. In August, while helping shelter dogs, he saw JoJo, who had been confiscated by Dallas Animal Services in an animal-cruelty case and placed on the euthanasia list. Adam arranged for him to be transported to Kansas City, but JoJo arrived terrified. Instead of playing with the other dogs, he would sit alone in the corner of the yard and watch them.

“I could feel his trauma and just wanted to do whatever I could to give him a better life,” Adam says.

Adam and Mata adopted JoJo, and soon he and Suki began to bond. Today, all three dogs spend hours racing around the yard, playing tag, chasing squirrels and curling up together.

“It's been super rewarding to see this little guy really open up and start enjoying life like a dog should,” Adam says. “He still has moments when he's shy or unsure, but with his two sisters, and Mata and myself, he has



learned that he no longer has to worry about being mistreated."

The dogs have plenty of room to grow and play at the couple's home in Shawnee, where Adam has lived since 2018. They love their peaceful neighborhood, spacious backyard and, especially, their neighbors.

Adam says his kind, friendly community has repeatedly shown a willingness to help. Recently, when he posted on social media that he needed help with the yard, offers poured in. One neighbor even helped him plant a flowerbed and refused any payment.

"That is something I think is truly unique about the people in our community," Adam says. "Many are willing to help without expecting anything in return. It shows the true Midwestern mentality. I also love how people are genuinely interested in other people's stories – not to be nosy but because they really care."

TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

After the 2015 attack, Adam faced many physical challenges. At one point, he was taking more than 18 medications, some of which created additional health problems, including severe root recession and damage to his teeth. A few months ago, he traveled to Austin, Texas, for implant surgery.

The medications he has to take also severely limit his daily life. He has to be careful in the sun and heat, even on winter or overcast days, because he is vulnerable to burns and overheating.

Returning to work has been another challenge. Adam has found it particularly difficult to find workplaces able to accommodate both his disability and his service dog.

"I live with a disability and navigate daily life with a service dog," he says. "There are many others like me who manage life thanks to the support of their service dogs."

For Adam and other individuals with a disability, that support is what makes independence possible.

A CALL TO CHANGE LIVES

Losing Charlie gave Adam a new sense of purpose – one that has grown into a mission to change the lives of shelter dogs and people with disabilities: Charlie's Call to Duty.

Charlie's Call to Duty is a rescue organization focused on identifying at-risk shelter dogs with the potential to become service or therapy dogs. The goal is to get those dogs to safety, evaluate and train them, and ultimately place them at no cost with individuals who need a service dog or with hospitals, schools and therapy organizations that could benefit from a trained therapy dog.

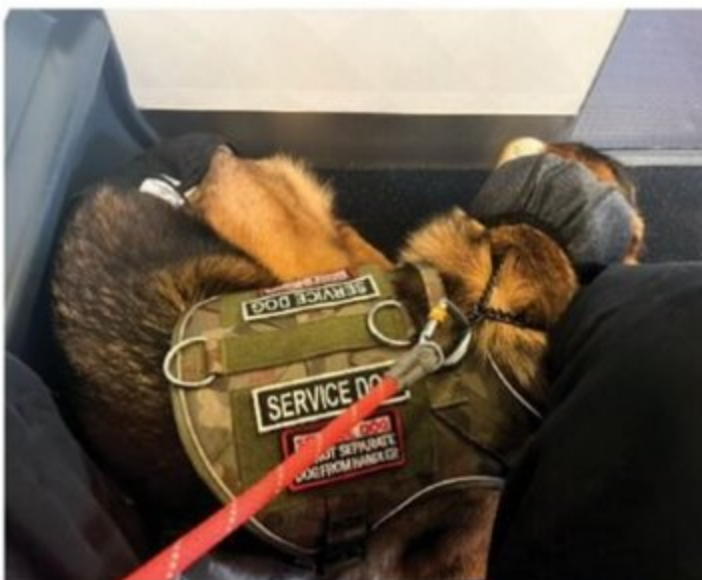
"Charlie was the primary reason I had this idea because I truly believe I would not be here today if it had not been for him," Adam says. "I have had this idea for a long time, but I never thought it would be possible."

Adam knows firsthand how profoundly a service dog can change the life of someone living with a disability. He also knows that a trained service dog can cost around \$25,000, putting one out of reach for many people who could benefit from one. He has seen the potential in countless dogs sitting in overcrowded shelters across the country – many of whom are euthanized simply because there is no space.

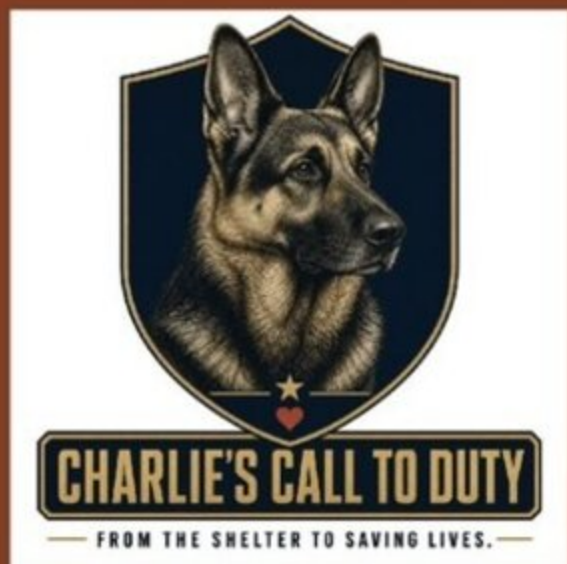
Charlie's Call to Duty hopes to solve both problems.

"Our mission is simple: We will focus on saving dogs at risk of euthanasia, train them to be service or therapy dogs, and provide them free of charge to individuals with disabilities or organizations that would benefit from a therapy dog's help," Adam says. "It's a great way to help the community, dogs, shelters and individuals."

He has started the process of establishing Charlie's Call to Duty as an official 501c3 nonprofit. There are still significant hurdles ahead, including assembling an experienced board, securing qualified trainers and building



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Website: www.charliescalltoduty.org

Facebook: Charlie's Call to Duty

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a network of volunteers, foster families, veterinarians, transporters and placement partners.

One important piece is already falling into place. Charlie's Call to Duty will partner with the UK-based Canine Behavioral College, an internationally recognized and accredited training organization that will provide training for the rescue's dog trainers.

For now, the organization's greatest needs include volunteers, contributors and foster homes. Until Charlie's Call to Duty can acquire its own property, foster families will be needed to provide a safe place for dogs while they are evaluated and trained. Adam also hopes to build partnerships with veterinarians and trainers willing to provide their services and with organizations that can help place service and therapy dogs with people who need them.

Eventually, he envisions a dedicated facility with onsite veterinary care and training, along with comfortable "dog condos" designed to feel like home, complete with beds, couches, televisions and shared spaces for the dogs to socialize. Adam has already identified a potential site, but purchasing the \$180,000 property will take time and fundraising.

"My hope is to make this a national resource for tagging dogs all across the country and providing placement to individuals with disabilities anywhere in the U.S.," he says.

Adam is now focused on taking those first steps and building the community needed to bring his vision to life. He knows it will take a village, but he's excited about what's possible – and the lives that will be changed as a result.

Charlie's Call to Duty is Adam's way of turning his special bond with Charlie into a lasting legacy – one that will give dogs and people a chance at a better life, just like Charlie gave him.

"I truly believe that Charlie's Call to Duty will change the lives of many people and at-risk shelter dogs all over the country – just as Charlie changed my life," Adam says. "I invite you to cheer us on and help turn this dream into a reality."

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