

# Swiss veterinarian to perform rare surgery on Marion dog

BY LINDA BURCHETTE

Staff

A veterinarian in Switzerland who developed the first elbow replacement for dogs is coming to America to donate his expertise for a local service dog.

Marion resident Judy L. Vaught, a retired teacher, is over the moon for Seven, her black Labrador, to receive this rare procedure. It will take place Nov. 30 at Virginia Tech.

"Labs have been getting hip replacements for a decade, but an elbow is more complex," Vaught said. "This vet in Switzerland designed an implant for his own dog when he couldn't find one."

The surgery will give Seven a new lease on life as his condition has worsened to the point he has trouble walking. He was

diagnosed with a bone disease when he was young, Vaught said, which was discovered when he was training as a service dog. It is deteriorating his joint.

"He was one and a half years old when we went to Tech for a visit and they said it would only get worse as he got older," she said. "I've been so careful with him, but in the past year he's been struggling with walking. I feel like he's in pain because he was so driven and now he's not as eager about doing things. He stopped going down with me to put the chickens to bed, and he loved that."

"Like the name implies, Seven serves me in ways that don't always meet the eye," said Vaught, who has had him for five and a half years. "He does many jobs like retrieve items that are

dropped, open doors, and assist with errands. He can also detect low oxygen. That is his super power. He has not only done it with me but also with strangers in the doctor's office and a man he was visiting in a nursing home. His value has no limits. That is why his debilitating bone disease was so devastating to me."

She said he was named Seven after a note from his trainer said that "whoever gets this dog will be the luckiest person on Earth."

Vaught said that Seven has been to The Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine on the campus of Virginia Tech several times before. They have performed surgery on his front leg to try to repair the joint.

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# Rare

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“However, Seven was to the point that the pain was interfering with his desire to do his job,” she said. “He was missing steps, faltering his gate and not wanting to accompany me to do jobs he usually bounds to do.”

Vaught said she thought that it was almost time to give him a break and let him retire. Opioids were the only thing that could ease his pain.

“We had come to the recognition that the pain was in need of some potent medications,” she said. “This came with its own complications. Then came the call that was the best miracle that we could ever hope for. In fact, we hadn’t even imagined such a miracle.”

Vaught said she and her husband were headed to Kingsport for a doctor’s appointment when they learned of the unexpected miracle.

“We were going to another doctor appointment which has been the norm this year,” she said. “The phone rang and I would not have normally answered it at that time, but the caller ID said Virginia Tech. When I answered, the doctor introduced himself and explained to us that there was a veterinarian in Switzerland who had a Labrador with the same condition as Seven. He ran into the complication that there was no ‘elbow’ joint for dogs. They have a hip replacement but the elbow is much more complicated. Therefore, the vet set about designing and making a joint for his dog.”

A year later his dog is doing very well, she said. “The Swiss veterinarian published a report on his invention and a veterinarian in Oklahoma saw the report and contacted the designer/inventor because his dog also suffered the same ailment. They worked together to implant the design in his dog here in the United States. This dog is doing well with the new joint.”

“Here’s where we come in,” she said. “The vets at Tech reached out to the inventor and he is willing to



**The Rev. Emily Edmondson gives Seven a blessing during the Blessing of the Animals.**

come to Virginia Tech and implant the new elbow in Seven.”

The joy was immense and immediate.

“I felt like this is a blessing and a miracle sitting there listening to that call,” Vaught said.

“We could not believe what we were hearing. Seven will be only the third dog in the world to receive this implant. If it proves successful this will be an opening for debilitated dogs everywhere. The elbow joint has proven complicated to replicate. Seven will require months of rehabilitation, a task that we believe he will be suited for.”

Vaught said the Swiss vet will fly in and scrub up with the vets at Virginia Tech. The only cost to Vaught will be the fees from Tech, about \$2,000, and she has started a fundraiser called Judy’s Pets/Animal Fundraiser on her Facebook page.

“We appreciate any help we can get to be able to obtain this surgery,” Vaught



said to donors. “Thank you for considering us at this time.”

“We are grateful to God and the staff at the Virginia Tech Veterinary College for the opportunity

to give Seven a chance at a better life. In this year of 2020 with Covid-19 and all that has happened in the world, we have a bright spot that we are so thankful for.”



# Seven surprises surgery team

## Owner feels like a miracle took place

BY LINDA BURCHETTE

Staff

That Barry Manilow song comes to mind: "It's a miracle, a true blue spectacle, a miracle come true."

Such is the case with a local service dog whose deteriorating elbow was slowing him down until a team of special veterinarians brought about a miracle for him and his owner.

Marion resident Judy L. Vaught thanks and praises that team for rescuing her black Labrador, Seven, from the pain and frustra-

tion he was feeling and the poor outlook for his future.

"Labs have been getting hip replacements for a decade, but an elbow is more complex," Vaught said about the surgery. A Swiss veterinarian who developed an elbow replacement for his Labrador when he couldn't find one offered to come to America and help Seven.

Seven was only the third dog to undergo this surgery.

Vaught said that Seven, who was diagnosed with a bone disease when he was

young that was discovered during his training, has been to The Virginia – Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine on the campus of Virginia Tech several times before. Surgery was performed on his front leg to try to repair the joint but it wasn't helping. Powerful medication and retirement seemed to be the only hope to ease his pain.

"Seven was to the point that the pain was interfering with his desire to do his job," Vaught said. "He was missing steps, faltering his gate and not wanting to accompany me to do jobs he usually bounds

to do."

Seven can retrieve items that are dropped, open doors, and assist with errands. "He can also detect low oxygen. That is his super power," Vaught said. "His value has no limits. That is why his debilitating bone disease was so devastating to me."

She is hoping this surgery will give Seven a new lease on life.

"Seven did very well with the surgery," Vaught said, which lasted five and a half hours. "He woke up in recovery and was ready to go. They were so pleased.

# Seven

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Their comment was "We did not expect him to be up and moving so well."

Vaught said preparation for the surgery was meticulous to the last detail.

"The day before surgery the doctors and staff did a complete rehearsal of the entire surgery down to who would twist each screw, who applied the cement and who stitched each place," she said. "This was a new procedure for them so they wanted everything perfect."

Safety during the pandemic was also a priority. Vaught said she never even got to meet the veterinarians in person, especially the vet from Switzerland who came so far to

help her dog.

"With COVID so bad everything was over the phone," she said. "An assistant brought Seven to an air lock and we came through the door and got him after they stepped out. It was very touchless. Everyone was extremely careful. I mean I didn't even get to meet him. But we have a great outcome so I can't complain."

She might have wrung her hands in worry as the surgery took place, but Vaught said she knew her dog was in really good hands.

"The day of surgery, they called that morning and went over the process of what had been done to Seven so far and what was to come for him," she said. "The personnel were the best. They called several

times through the day. Dr. Lanz called with updates even the day after as we returned home to make sure all was well. The surgeons were Dr. Otto Lanz and Dr. Rachel Chmelovski. There were several DMV candidates assigned to his care as well."

"He (Dr. Lanz) said that every time they said Seven's name even when sedated his tail wagged. He is so sweet."

This past Friday, Seven went to Smyth County Animal Hospital to have his bandage removed. Vaught said they sent pictures of the wound to the doctors at Virginia Tech for review.

In just under two weeks, Vaught and Seven will return to Smyth County Animal Hospital for removal of the sutures. Then, if all is well, Seven will be

going to Abingdon VCA Highlands Animal Clinic for rehabilitation therapy. He will be doing exercises to improve his movement and using the treadmill pool to help with mobility.

"Virginia Tech will follow Seven for the next six months to make sure the process is working for him," she said. "We return to Tech for radiography and examination in six weeks or if anything unusual occurs."

In this season of miracles, Vaught is especially grateful for Seven's progress and the prayers and support of so many in the community and beyond.

"In this time of COVID," she said, "it is nice to have this miracle."