

# Labrador Hooper pays it forward after surviving Hurricane Katrina

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Eastonite Jane Paley and her dog Hooper, who was rescued after he became homeless in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. —Liz Skalka photo

Whether or not he realizes it, Hooper is paying forward his good fortune.

The friendly and mellow yellow Labrador retriever was one of many pets who found themselves homeless and alone in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Sick, scared and in shock, Hooper received the good fortune of a lifetime when he was scooped up by Labs4rescue, a group dedicated to saving Labradors, and adopted by Eastonites Jane Paley and her husband, Larry Price.

After finding Hooper online and driving several hours to meet him, Ms. Paley said it ended up being puppy love at first sight.

“I sat in the back seat and held him in my arms,” she recalled. “By the time we got to New York we were bonded. As corny as it sounds, it’s a love story.”

Hooper, now about 7, eventually overcame his heartworm, malnourishment and trauma, and his patient and focused nature became apparent. So apparent, in fact, that while he was taking obedience classes Ms. Paley started to wonder whether Hooper could be used as a therapy dog.

“He was the demo dog,” Ms. Paley said. “Every single exercise was spot on.”

Hooper received specialized therapy training and became a Registered Pet Partner and Reading Education Assistance Dog.

Though during his younger years Hooper had more energy to visit hospitals and schools, he still provides assistance to children learning to read.

Hooper's calm disposition makes it possible for him to do this kind of work, Ms. Paley said.

Last week, a group of about 20 elementary and middle school students from Easton read in a group with Hooper at the Easton Community Center for a CBS news segment. The segment featured Ms. Paley's new book, *Hooper Finds a Family: A Hurricane Katrina Dog's Survival Tale* (Harper), and aired last Saturday morning.

The kids sprawled out next to Hooper on the ground, running their fingers through his fur and tugging on his ears while Ms. Paley and their peers read aloud.

"He makes reading fun for them," she said. "They associate it more with a leisure activity than something they have to do for school."

Children are also more confident reading in front of their peers when a dog is present, Ms. Paley said. Dogs provide a non-judgmental audience for practicing reading aloud, she explained.

"A dog is not going to say you pronounced a word wrong," she said.

For the CBS segment, Ms. Paley and the students read passages from her book, which is Hooper's account of what it must have been like enduring Hurricane Katrina and then moving up North.

The 144-page read is geared for ages 8 to 12, but may be enjoyed by anyone who loves dogs, Ms. Paley said.

She said the book was a tribute of sorts to Hooper and all he has done for others, as well as her family.

Ms. Paley and her husband adopted Hooper to fill a void at their home after their dog Hammer died.

But adopting a dog who has gone through what Hooper has is not always easy. Ms. Paley said unlike most Labrador retrievers, Hooper is afraid to swim. He also frightens easily during loud storms, but Ms. Paley has learned that wrapping him in a blanket and sitting with him can help calm his nerves.

Hooper also suffers from separation anxiety and

Hooper sits with children at the Easton Community Center for a CBS news segment. —Liz Skalka photo

is rarely left home alone for long periods of time. But Ms. Paley and her husband do not mind having Hooper by their side throughout the day.

Part of what makes Hooper a good pet and good at therapy is his sensitivity to others' emotions, Ms. Paley said.

She recalled a time when she was distraught and Hooper tried to comfort her by sitting in her lap. "I really melted. That was just such a wonderful moment we had," she said.

Hooper's story is one of "wanting to be loved and accepted and safe," Ms. Paley said.

Mr. Price has enjoyed seeing his relationship with Hooper unfold as the Lab's personality evolved.

He said Hooper came to them "a dog that was not so confident and traumatized, who has turned into a really confident healer."

Ms. Paley said *Hooper Finds a Family* is her first original book. She has spent her career as a writer and documentary producer at ABC and Paley-Price Productions. She earned an Emmy and National Education Association Award for her ABC Notebook educational programming.

Ms. Paley and Mr. Price started as weekenders in Easton and now consider themselves full-time residents.

Ms. Paley hopes to write more books about dogs — when she's not busy with her own.

"[Hooper] really was the gift that gave back," she said. "We've got more out of this experience than he has."

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