

 *in their*
Debt

By Jen Reeder



PHOTO COURTESY OF KENNETH E. HUGHES

COMEDY TEAM

Stand-up comedian Kenneth E. Hughes and his guide dog, Buddy, spread laughter and joy.

W

hile performing a stand-up comedy routine last year, Kenneth E. Hughes heard the audience roar

with laughter – *before* he delivered the punchline.

It turned out that his guide dog, a yellow Lab-mix named Buddy, had chosen that precise moment to flop onto his side to relax on stage, to the delight of the crowd.

“Everybody loves Labs, and he has that handsome face,” Hughes says with a chuckle. “It’s just a leg up. He’s a winner.”

Hughes – who quips that he includes his middle initial “E” in his full name because “I’m a little extra” – partnered with Buddy in 2020 through the nonprofit Southeastern Guide Dogs in Palmetto, Florida. He recognized a kindred spirit in the Lab since Buddy is naturally silly, social, and funny. He even dubbed his dog “Lord Buddington” because Buddy, like Hughes, is a little extra.

The partnership has proven fun as well as life-changing. Hughes was only 24 years old when he was diagnosed with *retinitis pigmentosa* (RP), a rare hereditary condition that causes vision loss. His initial response to the news was relief; he finally understood why he’d struggled with supposedly simple things like catching a baseball or dribbling a basketball – or later, getting into car accidents.

“It was causing stress and anxiety because I didn’t feel like a careless, clumsy person,” he recalls. “It was very frustrating to me.”

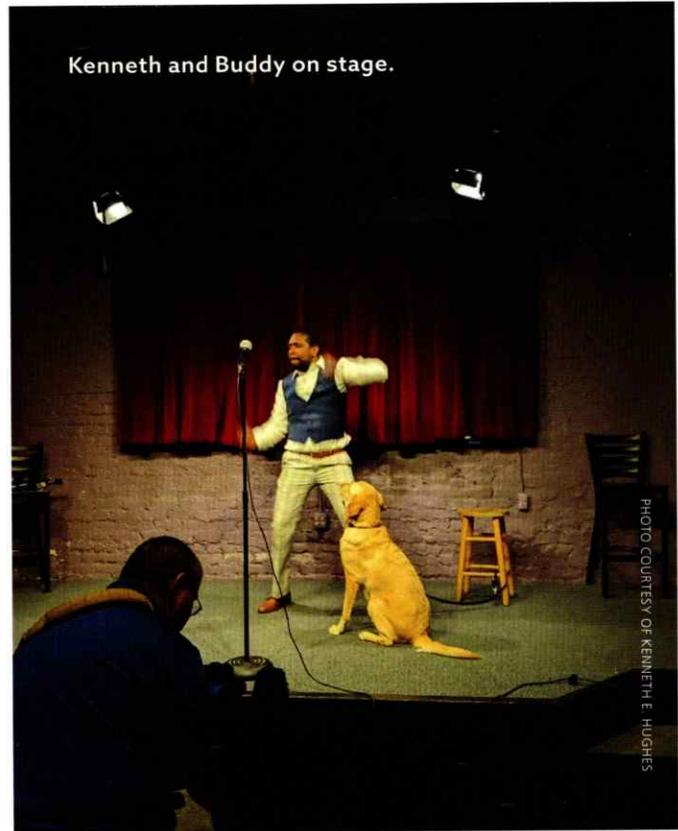
Learning he had RP explained why he’d seemed accident-prone – but then he found out there’s no cure, and it would get worse.

“It’s still very confusing because it’s not like you have sight and then you don’t. It’s very tricky when you lose a small amount of vision over the course of your life,” he shares.

His left eye deteriorated more quickly than his right. He worked for years as a flight attendant before retiring in 2008 because it was too hard to see during night flights. Around the same time, he stopped driving because he was having more accidents. In one instance, he drove through a railroad crossing and the arm slammed down onto his car’s windshield.

“The scary part was I never knew where the train was,” he says.

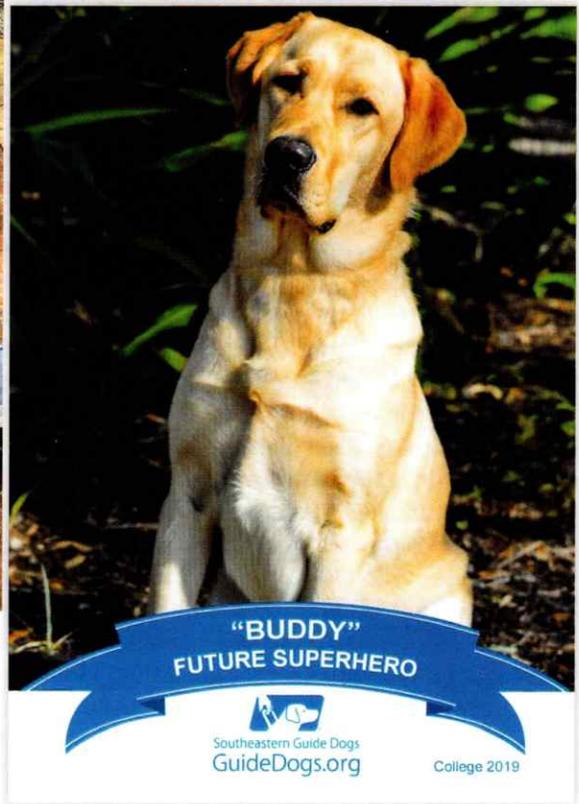
So in his early 30s, Hughes needed to figure out new directions. While working as an independent living specialist for a nonprofit that offers peer support to people



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Kenneth and Buddy



with disabilities, he met a client with a guide dog and thought, *Maybe I should get a guide dog.*

"I flirted with the idea for a very long time. As a layman, I thought, 'Oh, I don't know how to train a dog.' I also had other dogs and I didn't want to have [it be] like a kennel," he jokes. "My dogs were kind of spoiled. They jumped on furniture and begged for food and things like that. I didn't want to have a dog go through so much training to ruin him."

Eventually, he contacted Southeastern Guide Dogs and learned the nonprofit trains guide dogs and provides them – and a lifetime of follow-up care – for free. He also learned a dog wearing a harness focuses on work, not play, and that he'd learn how to work with a guide dog.

When Hughes met Buddy on the Florida campus in July of 2020, they immediately hit it off. Though he'd hoped to partner with a breed that doesn't shed quite so copiously, it's a small price to pay for such a perfect match. (Plus, as Hughes quips, "I tell people I look good because I don't see the dog hair all over me.")

"There's a reason why Labs are the number one breed in the country. They're so loving, affectionate, and have such distinct personalities," he says. "Everybody talks

about how charming Buddy is. I'd never had a Lab before, but now I understand."

Now Buddy guides Hughes on walks in the neighborhood and to the grocery store, mall, and comedy gigs.

"Buddy can find elevators. He can find steps. He knows his left from his right. He looks for the curb," Hughes says. "He's a really great guide. I can go into the world without fear of obstacles, obstruction, debris. It is a new-found freedom."

He's enjoying it as much as possible. While taking an improv class, Hughes found his calling in comedy. (It's a natural fit: growing up, he and his siblings played a game they called "make me laugh.") After garnering laughter and applause at an open-mic night, he was hooked.

Hughes became the founder and producer of 20/20 Productions, which organizes monthly comedy showcases in Greenville, South Carolina, currently at the popular venue Hoppin' GVL. Many stand-up comedians participate, including Hughes. Since he's legally blind, he can't "read the room" by looking at audience reactions – he must rely on his sense of hearing.

"Doing standup is the most vulnerable position you can put yourself in. But when you get the laughs, it's worth it. It's so rewarding," he says. "It's different for me because I can't see their faces. Every line isn't thunderous applause – sometimes they're smiling. I have to hear them laugh, so I work hard to make people laugh when I'm on that stage."

Volunteer puppy raisers for guide dogs like Buddy socialize the dogs from an early age so they aren't startled or anxious in noisy crowds, whether inside a theater or club or at a concert or sporting event.

Southeastern Guide Dogs places 60 to 65 guide dogs each year and provides the dog, training, equipment, annual veterinary visits, and other ongoing support at no cost. Fromm Family Pet Food provides free dog food for graduates, and Elanco donates monthly parasite preventive medication, according to Jennifer Johnson, director of the guide dog program at Southeastern Guide Dogs.

The nonprofit trains primarily Labs, though some – like Buddy – are crossed with golden retrievers. Johnson says the loyalty, intelligence, and work ethic of Labs make them terrific partners.

"Even if you've never had a dog before, you can be paired with a Lab and be very successful," she says. "The human-animal bond is such a powerful motivator that once you pair them together, great things happen."

Johnson says she's inspired by the partnership between Hughes and Buddy – as well as all the students who partner with the nonprofit's dogs. In addition to guide dogs, the organization trains service dogs for veterans with disabilities, facility therapy dogs, emotional support animals for Gold Star Families of fallen soldiers, and skilled companions for children with vision loss.

"It's such a privilege to meet such amazing people," she says. "They all have a different story."

For his part, Hughes is thrilled that his story includes Buddy.

"Making people happy, bringing joy to people – that's the most amazing feeling in the world," Hughes says. "I have an outlet for being a naturally silly person. I have a place to do it, and my guide dog gives me the independence and freedom to get to where I need to go. And of course, he's fun – and funny." 🐾

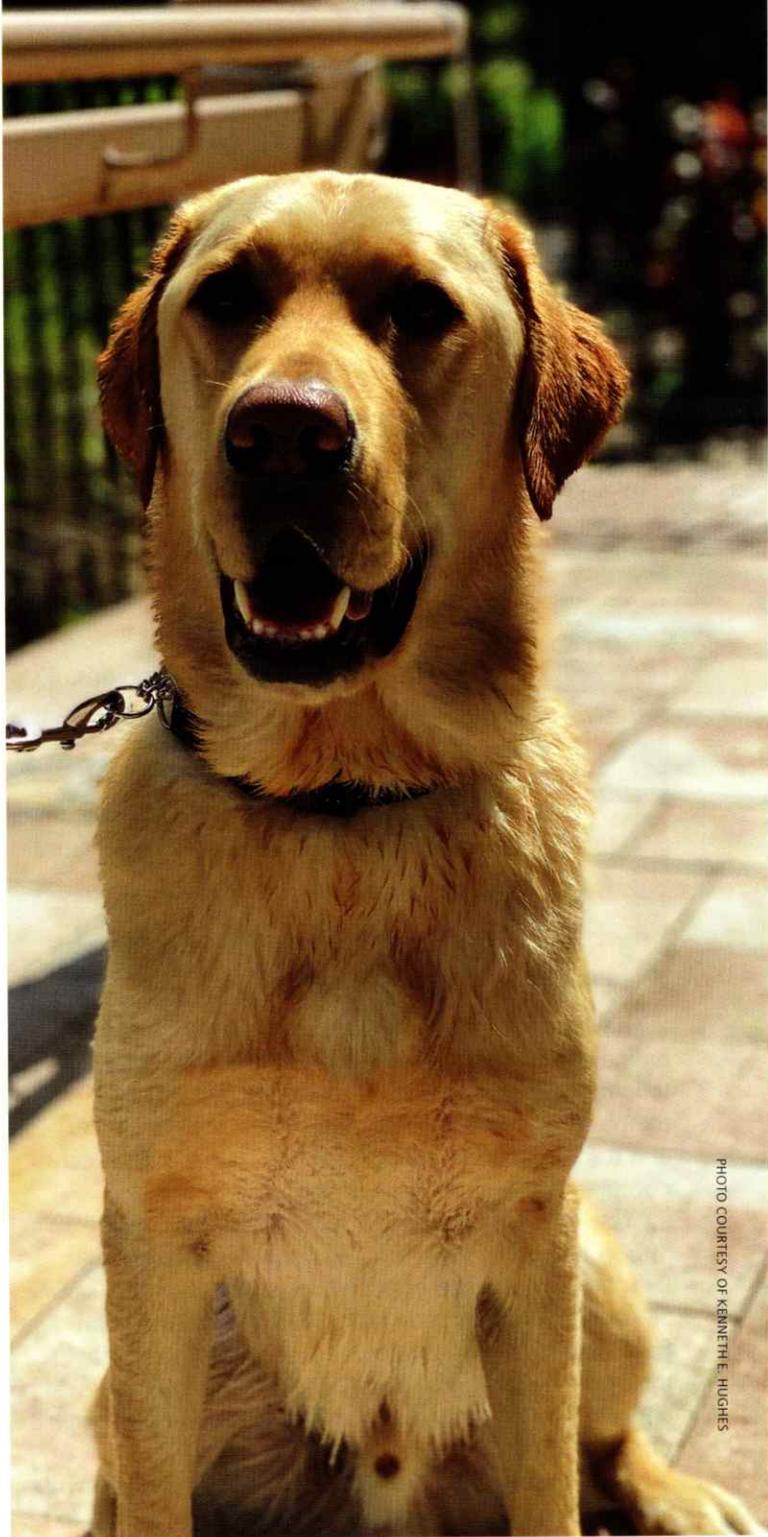


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Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.

For more information or to learn how to volunteer as a puppy raiser for Southeastern Guide Dogs, visit: GuideDogs.org.