

Guide dog gives Redlands woman new 'independence'

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Janie Derderian was riding her motorcycle the day before she had a seizure, two strokes and two heart attacks that left her brain dead and in a coma.

Without warning, Derderian, a 58-year-old from Redlands, had a grand mal seizure while rewiring an unplugged lamp on May 15, 2007. Two strokes followed. After being found 15 minutes later, she was taken to a hospital in Garberville, where she was living at the time.

"When I got to the hospital, they told me later, they said 'whoa, we can't handle this,' so they sent me to Napa," Derderian said.

While being air lifted to a Napa hospital, Derderian had a heart attack, she said. Fog made it impossible for the helicopter to land in Napa, so they returned to the Garberville hospital. The doctors again sent her to Napa.

On the trip back to Napa, Derderian had a second heart attack.

"By the time I arrived, I was alive but wasn't in good shape," Derderian said.

She had no brain activity and was sent to UC San Francisco Medical Center a few days later, Derderian said.

"I was in a coma the whole time," Derderian said.

Because she had signed a "do not resuscitate" form, doctors told family members she must to be taken off life support.

"My family came up to Napa to say goodbye," Derderian said. "They unplugged me, took all the feeding tubes out.

"A few days later, a nurse happened to be in the room and she saw me sit up a little bit and (make a noise).

Apparently, my brain started working and indeed I was alive."

In Napa, doctors taught Derderian basic functions again like swallowing and speaking.

"I had to relearn how to do everything," Derderian said.

Derderian lost her vision, although she has since regained some of her sight, she is still considered legally blind.

More than a year ago, Derderian, who moved back to her hometown of Redlands after recovering, applied for a guide dog through Guide Dogs of the Desert.

After being selected, a specialist from Guide Dogs of the Desert started teaching Derderian safety skills.

"The dog's got its responsibility and the handler's got its responsibility," said orientation and mobility specialist Emily Goodland. "(The dog) can get them where they're going but (the handler) has to know where they're going."

In February, she entered the month-long training program near Palm Springs where she worked with her new blonde labrador retriever Kiko.

"We train the dogs all the basics of guide work before they go to their handler," said Mindy Romero, guide dog mobility instructor. "Our job in the 28 days is to make sure the students learn what the dog knows, how to give the commands, how to position their bodies correctly."

At the training, which Derderian called a "boot camp," the six human-dog teams went out to local cities, including Redlands, to practice moving and living with each other.

"Our focus is to make sure the student can get from point A to point B safely," Romero said.

"It means stopping at curbs or taking (the handler) around an obstacle, a street cone on a sidewalk or signs," Romero said. "Instead of (Derderian) having to go around it with a cane, she can actually go around it by following her dog's harness handle and it will be one less thing to have to worry about."

On March 14, Derderian and 2-year-old Kiko graduated from the nonprofit school.

"Kiko has transformed my life," Derderian said. "Before, I was afraid but Kiko gives me independence. Every day is a new adventure."