

Ada County is the first in Idaho to allow service dogs to comfort children who testify in criminal trials

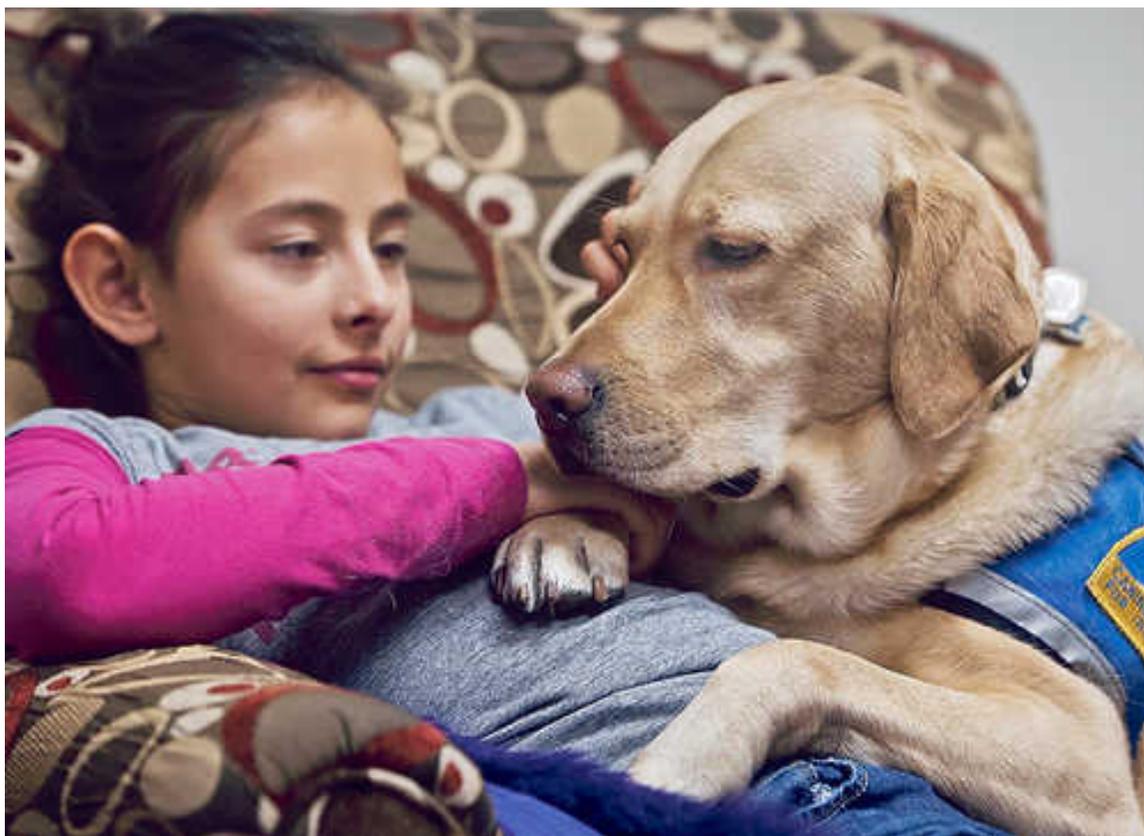
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Ariah Garza relaxes with Sunday, a mixed Labrador/golden retriever that provided comfort and support when the girl testified in 4th District Court this fall against a man who was accused — and convicted — of assaulting her mother.

Courtrooms can be scary places for anybody, but they are particularly intimidating to children who may have to face a judge, a jury — even a defendant they are afraid of. That was the case for 11-year-old Aria Garza this fall when she had to testify in a jury trial against a man she saw attack her mother.

Today, Norman Ortiz-Perez is serving a 20-year prison sentence for a felony domestic violence charge. But in September, he was the scary man sitting across the courtroom

from Ariaiah. Then there were those people Ariaiah didn't know sitting in the box at the side of the courtroom — the jurors — and the lawyers asking questions.

But Ariaiah had a secret friend who helped her manage. "It was kind of scary for a little while, but once Sunday was under me, I felt safe," Garza told the Statesman last week. Sunday, an almost 3-year-old certified service dog, could make anyone feel better.

Sunday works out of Ada County's Victim-Witness Coordinators' Office in the Juvenile Court, and she has one major job — to put kids in scary situations at ease.

A DOG WITH A RESUME

Most of the time, Sunday does her job in offices or waiting areas at Juvenile Court, bonding with kids unfortunate enough to be involved in the court system. In September, she added another achievement to her resume: helping Ariaiah Garza testify in a criminal trial.

The jurors never even knew. Sunday sat still and silent under the witness stand, close enough so Ariaiah could hold her leash and touch her, but out of sight of the jury. Ariaiah and Sunday were brought in and out of the courtroom while the jury was out of the room. Ariaiah got through her testimony, and Sunday was perfectly behaved.

That the jury could not detect Sunday, and therefore be unduly influenced by a child who has a dog comfort her on the witness stand, was the requirement set by 4th District Judge Cheri Copsey.

A CUDDLE AND A LICK

Prosecutors worked to convince the judge at a motion hearing that Sunday would help, Ariaiah recalled, because she didn't like being in the same room with Ortiz-Perez. "I felt really scared. I don't like him, and he just kept giving me mean looks," Ariaiah told the Statesman. "Even though there were guys next to (Ortiz-Perez), I didn't feel safe." Ada County Deputy Prosecutor Tessie Buttram handled the case and said that Sunday helped Ariaiah even before she was on the witness stand.

Ariaiah said she felt sick to her stomach and started crying because she was so nervous about going into court. Then she met up with Sunday, who immediately sensed Ariaiah's fear and cuddled up to her, licking the tears off her face.

"Sunday can sense the fear and apprehension in a child and help with that right away," Buttram said. "She was whimpering, like she didn't want Ariaiah to cry." Minutes later, Sunday was providing silent support for Ariaiah out of sight on the witness stand.

After a four-day trial, the jury found Ortiz-Perez guilty of felony domestic violence, as well as misdemeanor counts of malicious injury to property and carrying a concealed weapon.

HELPING OUT IN ANOTHER CASE SOON

The dog's courtroom debut was a success. Now, Sunday is scheduled to help another child testify in a felony sexual battery case in January.

The notion of having Sunday assist kids in court came from her handler, Kristin Friend, a victim-witness coordinator who works for the Ada County Juvenile Court. Friend is the owner of a retired therapy dog and was intrigued by stories about service dogs trained to help kids in courtrooms in other states.

"It's our responsibility to do everything we possibly can to make (children) going through the judicial system as comfortable as possible," Friend said. "Anything less than the best we can do is unacceptable to me."

As a victim-witness coordinator, Friend sat next to Ariaiah as she testified, making sure there were no issues with Sunday. Kids can have trusted adults beside them when testifying in court, so that wouldn't have been a red flag for jurors.

CALIFORNIA-TRAINED

Sunday was bred and trained by Canine Companions for Independence in Santa Rosa, Calif., a non-profit that provides free trained assistance dogs for children and adults with disabilities.

Friend applied, and Sunday came to Ada County. The Idaho Humane Society provides Sunday's medical care. Sunday works a full-time schedule, spending most of her time in the juvenile court facility on West Denton Street. When she is needed to cuddle with a child or lick off tears, Sunday performs like a champ. When she has to be still and silent, she can do that, too.

OTHER SERVICES, TOO

As a fully trained service dog, Sunday can also open doors, pick items up off the floor, and open and shut drawers, Friend said. She's also good at cheering up adult court employees who need a boost, Friend said.

But when Friend removes Sunday's service-dog vest at the end of the day, what happens then?

"She goes crazy," Friend said.

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Read more here: <http://www.idahostatesman.com/2011/12/24/1928603/sunday-is-a-friend-to-kids-in.html#storylink=cpy>