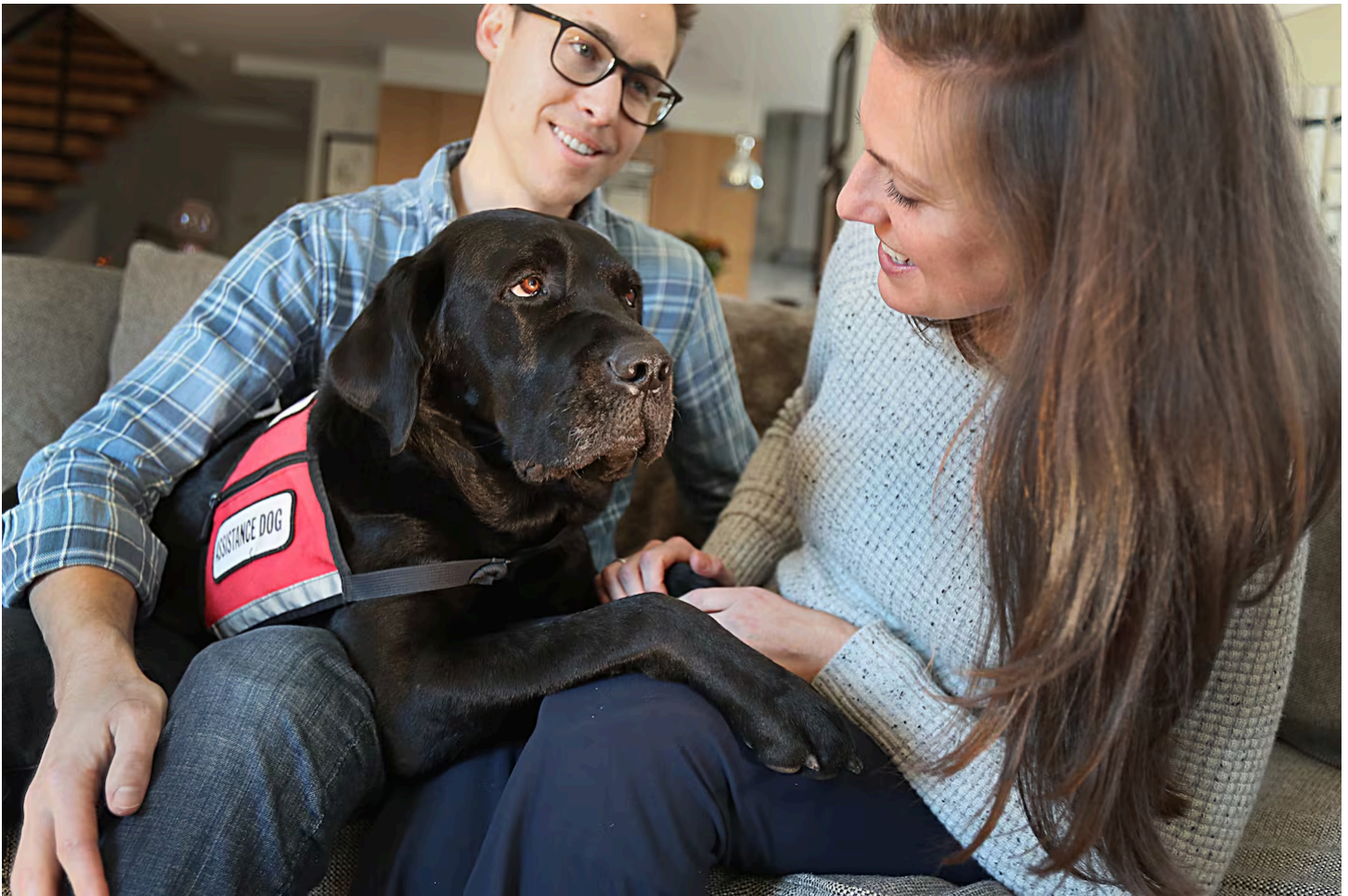


After the Marathon bombing, Rescue wasn't just their service dog and good boy, he was a lifeline and much-needed laugh

Jessica Kensky and Patrick Downes honor Rescue, who died last fall at the age of 13, with a celebration of life Saturday.

By [Mark Shanahan](#) Globe Staff, Updated February 6, 2026, 10:40 a.m.



Jessica Kensky, Patrick Downes, and Rescue in October 2016. SUZANNE KREITER

In the weeks and months after the tragedy of the [Boston Marathon bombing](#), Jessica Kensky and her husband, Patrick Downes, struggled to smile.

[The couple](#), who had been married for just seven months when each lost a leg in the blast, were grimly focused on their recovery, a grueling ordeal during which they had to learn how to live with a permanent physical disability. (Kensky's other leg was also damaged and eventually had to be amputated.)

"I didn't know how to navigate a world that wasn't built for me anymore," Kensky said, recalling the despair she felt in the early days of her convalescence.

But she and Downes didn't do it alone. In addition to family and friends, there were countless doctors and nurses, including the talented staff at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where the couple were patients for three years.

And that's not all. Six months after [the calamity](#) that killed three people and grievously injured dozens of others, Kensky was matched with a service dog, a 2-year-old black Lab named [Rescue](#), and the two forged an immediate — and intense — bond that lasted for more than a decade.

"We were laughing so hard," Downes said of Kensky's first play date with the pup in September 2013. "And as I was laughing, I also started to cry because I hadn't had positive emotions like that for a long time."



Jessica Kensky and Rescue in October 2013, shortly after Kensky and Patrick Downes received him from NEADS Service Dogs. SUZANNE KREITER

On Saturday, Kensky and Downes will pay tribute to Rescue, who died last September at the age of 13, with a memorial of sorts at the [Boston Public Library](#) in Copley Square. The free event (which required registration and is now full) will feature speakers, including two trainers who prepped Rescue for his life's work; a slide show of the many ways and places he helped Kensky; music; and a reading of "[Rescue & Jessica: A Life-Changing Friendship](#)," the children's book based on the couple's partnership with the dog.

"Every cool thing in our life over the last decade is pretty much attached to Rescue," said Kensky, who in 2024 [earned a doctorate](#) in nursing from the MGH Institute of Health Professions. "We really want to celebrate him and all that he gifted us."



Jessica Kensky, Rescue, and Patrick Downes in 2018. SUZANNE KREITER

Rescue arrived in the couple's life courtesy of [NEADS](#), a Princeton-based nonprofit that has trained some 1,900 service dog teams since its founding in 1976. The dogs provide a measure of independence to individuals with a variety of needs and physical disabilities, including people who are deaf, veterans with PTSD, and children with autism or other developmental disabilities.

In Kensky's case, Rescue was an able sidekick. He opened doors, fetched keys and cellphones, turned off lights, pressed elevator buttons; he accompanied Kensky to meetings, events, and restaurants. It was all hugely helpful. But, sometimes, just his presence was a relief.



In this pre-op photo taken early on the morning of Aug. 28, 2014, just before Jessica Kensky went into the OR for eight hours of surgery on both legs, Rescue was by her side. DOWNES-KENSKY FAMILY

“Everyone who came into our apartment and didn’t know what to say to Patrick and I, they just wanted to see what Rescue could do. He was always a happy and positive conversation,” said Kensky.

“Rescue gave Jess the confidence to go out into the world, just her and him,” said Downes, a [clinical psychologist](#). “For a long period of time, that felt incredibly overwhelming and she’d need to be accompanied by me or family or friends.

“When she and Rescue could go out, just the two of them, that did wonders for Jess,” he said.

Honestly, it was special for Rescue, too. In 2017, the loyal Lab was invited to New York City, where he was named Dog of the Year at the ASPCA Humane Awards. Rescue wasn’t just a good boy, ASPCA president Matt Bershadker said that night, he was “the full package.”

“He’s a companion, he’s a service dog, and he’s making (Kensky’s) life — in ways that we never could’ve contemplated — just a little bit easier,” Bershadker said.

The 2018 children’s book is an example. Kensky and Downes visited dozens of Massachusetts schools with Rescue, sharing their story with hundreds of students. “It was so much fun to engage in conversation with kids about people with disabilities and how we create a world that’s welcoming to everyone, regardless of who they are or what they’re capable of doing,” said Downes.



Jessica Kensky and Rescue in 2018, around the time she and her husband, Patrick Downes, wrote the children's book "Rescue & Jessica." SUZANNE KREITER

“Rescue & Jessica: A Life-Changing Friendship” became a New York Times bestseller, almost reaching No. 1 on the children’s book list.

“John Oliver came out with that book about [the gay rabbit](#),” said Kensky. “We have that book and we love it, but we never could unseat it. We made it to No. 2.”

Eventually, Rescue retired. He could no longer accompany Kensky to public events. Their roles were reversed. Sometimes in such cases, service dogs are returned to NEADS because an owner can’t care for them. Not so with Rescue.

“I was in a place, physically, where we were able to take care of him in the way he needed,” she said. “Rescue was a lot of work at the end, but he still loved going outside for his walks.”

Because Saturday’s event is a celebration of Rescue’s life, a few of his buddies will be in attendance. “Some of his four-legged friends are going to get up and do a dog demo,” Kensky said. “Yes, we’re going to talk about grief and showing up and being there for each other, but we want this to be fun, too.”

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