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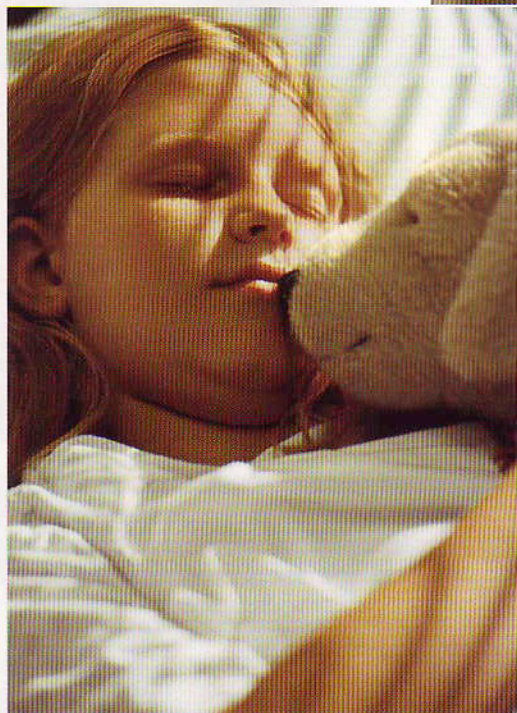
**Hospitalized children gain comfort
from a great dog named Josh.**

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Southern Living

Caring Canine Comforts

A dog named Josh, his concerned owner, and a friend bring comfort to sick children.



right: Dr. Randy Lange and Josh work together to help console hospitalized children. **above:** A plush Josh comforts a hospitalized child.



PHOTOGRAPHS: ADAM BARNES

Knoxville veterinarian Dr. Randy Lange restlessly walked the halls of East Tennessee Children's Hospital after his daughter's tonsillectomy. He noticed a surprising number of rooms along the corridor held young children who were alone.

"A nurse told me the children were 'drop-offs'—kids whose parents, for a variety of reasons, couldn't be with them," Randy recalls. "I was shocked to discover that every day, in hospitals all over the country, kids are left to face things such as surgery or chemotherapy all by themselves."

Haunted by the scene, Randy began

searching for a way to help. "As a vet, I deal with animal patients all the time who are frightened and can't express their concerns, just like children," he says. "I decided a book that takes an animal through a hospital experience—everything from X-rays to blood work—would be a good way to reassure kids and make their hospital stays less frightening."

Comforting Words

Unsuccessful at finding this type of book, Randy decided to write his own. *I'll Be O.K.* features the Lange family's golden retriever, Josh, as a

reluctant patient who needs abdominal surgery. "Kids identify with animals," Randy says. "By watching Josh overcome his fears, it helps children realize the hospital isn't such a scary place."

Unsure what to do with his completed manuscript, Randy approached Doug Leshner, a fellow Knoxville who at the time worked in the printing business. "When Randy asked me to read the text, I knew immediately that I wanted to be part of the project," Doug says. Doug's wife, artist Betsy Tarpley Leshner, agreed to create whimsical illustrations for

right: Children at East Tennessee Children's Hospital receive a plush Josh and a copy of Randy Lange's book, *I'll Be O.K.*

the book using a technique called stamp art.

"Betsy uses color so well," Randy says. "Her artwork gives the story the sort of warmth I was looking for."

Next, Randy and Doug designed a plush version of Josh to accompany the book and serve as a companion for hospitalized children. "Our thought was that when mom or dad couldn't be there, a child could hold Josh and not feel alone," Randy says. The partners wanted a cuddly, lifelike plush retriever puppy. To get the coat color just right, they sent a sample of the real Josh's fur to the manufacturer.

Doggone Money Woes

As the partners' vision of the project expanded, so did their expenses. "We're just two dads and a dog," Randy says. "There was no way Doug and I could fund this ourselves. But we've found that every time we're plodding along not sure which way to go next, a door always opens." Adds Doug: "Randy and I are both very strong in our faith. We believe we've been led to do this."

The duo (along with their four-footed accomplice) approached several organizations for help. A major door swung open in 1999 when Bayer Animal Health (maker of Advantage flea products) agreed to fund the start-up and operating costs for the project's first year. Since then, JoshCo, LLC, and its mission have been embraced by the American Veterinary Medical Association as well as the Children's Miracle Network, an alliance of 174 children's hospitals across the nation.

To date, more than 28,000 books and plush animals have comforted children around the country. Yet Randy quickly notes "more than 17½ million children were treated at Children's Miracle Network hospitals last year, so we still have a lot of work to do."

In several communities, hospitals



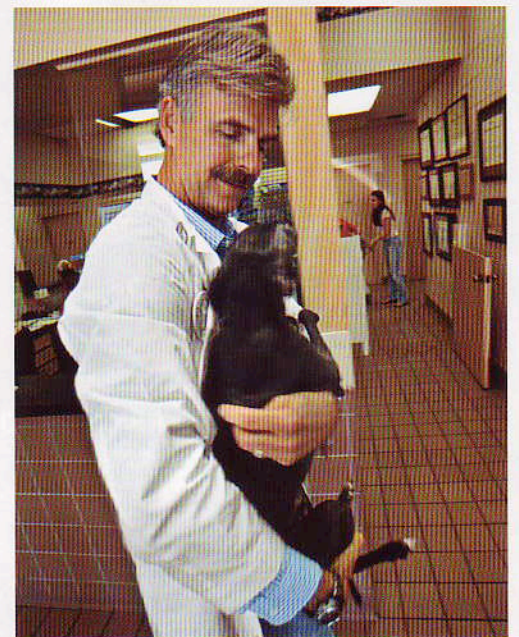
"...every day, in hospitals all over the country, kids are left to face things such as surgery or chemotherapy all by themselves."

Randy Lange, cocreator of JoshCo

provide the books and plush puppies to patients free of charge, thanks to the generosity of local corporate sponsors. In Knoxville, for example, realtors Rich and Patty Levenson, owners of RE/MAX Preferred Properties, sponsor a golf tournament each spring to fund the Josh project at East Tennessee Children's Hospital.

The project continues to expand nationally. "It's a win-win situation," Doug says. "The sponsoring company is associated with a very positive cause, and the money they raise directly helps children in their own community."

right: Veterinarian Randy Lange checks out a patient at Lange Animal Hospital in Knoxville.





Josh Jaunts

As often as possible, Randy and Doug take the real Josh to hospitals to comfort children. They also carry the special dog to medical and veterinary conventions to spread the word about the project. "Josh loves to work," Randy says. "Most of the time he's our family pet, but when he wears his bandanna, he knows it's showtime."

When they're home in Knoxville, Josh, Randy, and Doug regularly visit East Tennessee Children's Hospital. The amiable dog remains politely at-

tentive as adults pass by, but the moment a child appears, his tail wags an enthusiastic greeting. As one wheelchair-bound child approaches Josh and pets him, she leans her head on his shoulder and breaks into a big smile.

"Look," Randy says, nodding toward the pair, "that's why we do this. It's all about the kids."

PATRICIA HUDSON

"By watching Josh overcome his fears, it helps children realize the hospital isn't such a scary place."

*Randy Lange,
cocreator of JoshCo*

For more information, call (865) 675-6064, e-mail info@joshandfriends.com, or visit www.joshandfriends.com. To order call toll-free 1-877-455-2365.

below, left: A smiling patient hugs her plush Josh and basks in the proximity of the real Josh. **below, right:** Cofounders of JoshCo, Doug Leshner (standing) and Randy Lange confer at Lange Animal Hospital.



Puppy Power

Purchase the book *I'll Be O.K.* and a plush version of Josh for \$39.95, plus shipping and handling. A portion of the proceeds from each sale benefits the Children's Miracle Network hospital that serves the purchaser.