

Dave Schelske's beloved dog Sandy stood, motionless, on the tiny ledge, just one slip away from the abyss below

SURVIVOR DOG

BY ANITA BARTHOLOMEW



*Dave and Sandy
near their home in
Oregon State.*

THE HOUSE IN WEST LINN, just south of Portland, Oregon was quiet late on Christmas morning last year. For Dave Schelske, 46, the celebrations were over. He'd just dropped his eight-year-old twins, Tristan and Lawson, at their mother's place. Dave, an outdoorsman and professional photographer, decided to focus his attention—and his camera—on Oregon's natural beauty, with Sandy, his three-year-old Labrador retriever/Rhodesian ridgeback mix, by his side.

Having packed the retractable leash he'd bought Sandy for Christmas, his photography gear and other essentials, Dave opened the truck door so his energetic pet could jump in the cab. They headed off to the Columbia River Gorge, less than an hour north.

Dave liked to say that his family didn't pick out Sandy at the shelter; she chose them. He and the boys were sitting shoulder to shoulder in the reception area when the seven-month-old yellow pup was led out. In an instant, she jumped up and lay across their laps. They knew right away: this was their dog.

DAVE PULLED INTO the car park for Eagle Creek Trail, a hike he remembered for its waterfall about three kilometres from the trailhead.

But it had been so long since his last visit that he had forgotten about the dramatic drop-off on the narrow trail. Carved into a mountain, the path hugged a rock wall on the left; on the right, there was nothing—just a sheer vertical face that extended down a cliff to Eagle Creek. And the gorge became deeper the higher they climbed.

Dave made a mental note to choose a different trail next time he took Sandy on a hike. But the Lab mix was used to hard treks and rocky surfaces, and many other hikers had their dogs with them. Sandy's new leash extended about six metres from a retractable spool; now he realized he'd have to keep her very close and not let the lead extend at all in order to give other hikers enough space to pass.

At around noon, the pair climbed past a particularly tight stretch, only a little over a metre wide in places. Thick metal cables had been tethered to the rock wall for hikers to grasp. The drop-off into the gorge was more than 60 metres down.

It had been raining all morning. To the photographer's eye, the fog settling onto the trees coupled with the cable handrail wrapping the rock face created a striking composition. Dave tied Sandy's leash around a tree trunk, retrieved his camera from his backpack and began shooting.

Once satisfied, he started walking back toward Sandy, who sat patiently waiting. Suddenly, frightened by something, the dog bolted, all six

metres of retractable leash spooling out behind her. The last of it came undone from the stump as Dave took off after his dog. He shouted her name, expecting her to stop. And she did, for a moment. Then, *clank, clank, clank*, the plastic handle of the leash hit the rocks, spooking her even more.

"Sandy, wait!" he called, but she sped around the corner, out of sight.

When Dave heard a loud yelp, he assumed Sandy's collar had caught on something, pulling at her. He'd soothe her as soon as he caught up.

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But, seconds later, when he turned the same corner, all he found was a broken leash lying against a tree at the cliff's edge.

The path where he discovered the pieces hugged a steep incline fit only for mountain goats and very well-equipped climbers. After about six metres, it ended in a narrow slot canyon—and the edge dropped almost straight down. There were no skid or claw marks to indicate she'd slid on the incline. Far below, the creek roared and twisted over the rocks. *Where could she be?*

Panicked, Dave started back down the trail, asking a woman who was climbing up, "Did you see a yellow Labrador run by?" The woman said no. So did everyone else he passed. The other hikers suggested calling 911, but there was no signal this high up.

As the minutes stretched to an hour, his dread grew stronger. If Sandy had fallen near where he'd found her leash, she could not have survived.

He returned to the spot where Sandy had disappeared. None of this would have happened if he'd had her on her sturdier, shorter lead. *What will I tell the boys?* His sons loved Sandy as much as he did.

Again Dave frantically called her name. He knew there would be no response, but he couldn't stop himself.

Two middle-aged women coming up the trail heard his distressed cries and asked what had happened. He explained, then started climbing the main path to search for a way down. Dave bushwhacked his way down the makeshift side trail that led down the cliff. It would be difficult and unsafe, but he was an experienced climber. And it was his only chance of find Sandy's body.

Unbeknown to Dave, the two women headed down the main trail, found an access point to get to the river and started searching on their own. Dave soon found them and tried to discourage them, afraid they would be injured. "If you want to help,

maybe go to where the leash was," he said. Then he'd have a point of reference as he searched.

One agreed and turned back, but her friend said, "I'm going to help." She was staying with Dave.



DAVE WANTED TO BELIEVE THAT HIS DOG WOULD BE WAITING FOR HIM AT THE TRUCK. BUT HOPE WAS FADING.

ON THIS CHRISTMAS afternoon, firefighter-paramedic Rene Pizzo was in a movie theatre with her husband when her phone went off. The text message from the Oregon Humane Society Technical Animal Rescue Team (OHSTAR) said a dog had gone off a cliff and to check email for further details. Pizzo was the longest serving member of the volunteer OHSTAR crew, all trained to perform canine rescues under difficult conditions.

Rushing home, she changed into warm clothes, picked up her go-pack—helmet, harness, gloves, safety glasses, headlamp—and set out for the trailhead. Meanwhile, a few of her colleagues met up at the organization's headquarters in Portland to gather more rescue equipment.

According to the email, the dog had plunged off the Eagle Creek Trail.

This would be the third over that cliff in 2014 alone. Canine eyesight is no match for a human's. Plus, a dog's depth perception is poor. Hiking such a trail was much more hazardous for the pets than for their owners.

JUST BEFORE 5 P.M., John Thoeni and his girlfriend, veterinarian Emily Amsler, were sitting down to Christmas dinner. The candles were lit, the wine poured but not yet sampled. Then their phones rang simultaneously. The meal would have to wait. OHSTAR needed them at Eagle Creek.

In all, eight volunteers were calling off their festivities to save a dog that might already be beyond hope.

AT EAGLE CREEK, having descended for an hour through dense vegetation to the river, Dave and his companion searched for any sign of Sandy. Day was turning to dusk and the air growing colder. Without flashlights, they'd be stuck in the gorge for the night if they didn't turn back now. Disheartened, they turned around, Dave leading the way. He wanted to believe that somehow his dog would be waiting for him at the truck, but hope was fading.

Then he heard the woman behind him say something odd. "Hey, girl!"

What?

He followed her gaze upward but saw nothing, just bushes, boulders and the cliff.

He was almost afraid to ask: "Is she alive?"



The narrow trail - with cable handrails - close to where Sandy went over the edge.

The woman nodded. "She's looking right at me."

Dave clambered onto some logs and there she was, maybe 20 metres above him, wagging her tail. She was standing. That was a good sign. Relief and joy coursed through him.

"Come here, girl. C'mon, Sandy."

She whimpered but didn't move. *Why wasn't she coming to him?*

As he climbed closer, he saw her predicament. Perched on a tiny ledge near the bottom of a slot canyon, she

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was jammed against the rock wall at her back. Open space surrounded her, but Sandy was too far from a safe landing place to risk jumping.

Dave couldn't find a way to bridge the five or six metres that still separated him from the dog. He'd need some gear from his truck. Scrambling down again, he and his search partner made a plan. If they wrapped a rope around a nearby tree trunk and she paid it out as he climbed, he'd be able to grab Sandy and bring her back.

Meanwhile, a family Dave had met earlier had called 911. A rescue team was on its way.

As soon as he returned to the gorge, loaded with gear, Dave realized his plan wouldn't work. His helper was spent. Shivering, she told him the cold had caused her joints to painfully stiffen. She could barely move her fingers. She'd have to head back.

By now, it had to be about 5 p.m. The deep grey sky would soon be black. Dave felt defeated. Then the woman acting as lookout by the leash hollered down the canyon. The first animal rescue volunteer had arrived.

All he could do was wait and try to soothe his terrified dog. "It's going to be okay, girl. I'm right here."

AT ABOUT 7 P.M., the final members of the OHSTAR team reached Eagle Creek and began ascending the trail. Clouds obscured any moonlight that might have illuminated their path. Luckily, the woman who had been

helping Dave, and had first spotted Sandy, met them on the trail and pointed them to Dave's location, 60 metres below, in the canyon.



JOHN TRIED TO KEEP THE FRIGHTENED DOG CALM. "GOOD GIRL, SANDY. I'LL SEE YOU IN JUST A MINUTE..."

SANDY WAS TRAPPED ABOUT 50 metres down the cliff, the equivalent of a 15-storey building. The tiny ledge on which she stood wasn't flat but crowned—she couldn't sit or turn without risking a plunge to the gorge's floor. The dog had been standing like a statue for several hours. By now she was, in effect, frozen in place.

As the volunteers unloaded anchors, harnesses, ropes, lights and other gear, Dave shone his flashlight on the ledge so John Thoeni—who was going to rappel down the cliff to Sandy—would know where to land.

Extreme caution was in order: if he descended directly above the dog, falling debris could hurt her or scare her into jumping off the ledge and into the abyss. Once John reached Sandy's side, a dual rope-and-pulley system would be used to hoist man and dog back up again. Rene Pizzo was team leader; Amy Amsler doubled as vet and photographer.

Bruce Wyse, a mountaineer, was in charge of finding trees that met their parameters for anchoring the ropes and pulleys, but few were adequate. Either the roots were too shallow or the trunks weren't the right distance from the ledge. Two more hours passed before everything was in place and the rescue could begin.

DAVE COULD SEE none of this from his vantage point down by the creek. He focused on reassuring Sandy that he was still there and kept his flashlight trained on her. By now he had burned through several batteries. The chill cut through his clothing, but at least he could hop around to stay warm. Sandy couldn't move.

AT 9:36 P.M., John started rappelling down, in full protective gear and carrying a loaded pack. It had been more than eight hours since Sandy fell.

He reminded himself that from the dog's point of view, he might as well be descending from a UFO. She was trapped and frightened. Keeping his voice calm and even, John baby-talked to her as the team lowered him down. "Good girl, Sandy...I'll see you in just a minute..."

The team had hoped to deposit him just to the left of her, but the cliff wall curved in suddenly and left him dangling about a metre away from the rock face, unable to grab hold.

He would have to drop another three metres before he could climb to Sandy.

Digging his hands and feet into any crevice that gave him purchase, John clambered up the rock face made slippery by the rain until he was level with the dog. With one arm on the ledge to steady himself, he reached into his backpack to dig out a treat. As still now as the cliff itself, Sandy seemed to barely notice the offering.

Manoeuvring carefully, John attached a leash to her collar. Next came a muzzle, just in case. Finally, he wrapped her in a rescue harness connected, like the one he wore, to the rope-and-pulley system. They were good to go.

He radioed the team above to begin pulling. Cradling the dog against his chest to protect her from branches and rocks as they ascended, John and Sandy rose, 15, 30, 50 metres in the air. They reached the top at 10:23 p.m.

JOHN'S JOB WAS finished. It was time for Amy to assess Sandy.

Amazingly, she had few visible injuries: a torn foreclaw, badly scraped paw pads. But she was barely moving, wasn't whimpering. Sandy was in shock.

The team began to pack up, congratulating each other on a successful rescue. They had been given the best possible Christmas gift—it could have ended very differently.

The volunteers were ready to head back down the trail when Sandy finally brightened. They soon saw why: Dave had appeared at the edge of the

trail, having trekked up in the darkness, with just the small beam of his flashlight to guide him. Sandy rushed to her owner, who wrapped his arms around her in relief. He was so grateful no one had been hurt.

Dave beamed at his dog, then at the people who had abandoned their holiday plans to save her. "I wish I could hug you all," he said. 