

**MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - To remember Melissa and Mark Hortman, 'pet a dog,' say their children 01JXZQ900NZVV59BSVTQ9E6PVM**

INTERVIEWER: Melissa and Mark Hortman's children have released their first statement since the assassination of their parents on Saturday. In that statement, Sophie and Colin Hortman said, "The best way to honor our parents' memory is to do something, whether big or small, to make our community just a little better for someone else." One of the ways they said to do that is to, quote, "pet a dog. A Golden Retriever is ideal, but any will do."

Melissa and Mark Hortman had a beloved Golden Retriever, named Gilbert, who they adopted from an Eden Prairie nonprofit called "Helping Paws." We learned yesterday that Gilbert also did not survive the shooting. Helping Paws trains service dogs for people with disabilities, as well as first responders and veterans dealing with PTSD. The Hortmans were avid volunteers with this organization. Alyssa Golob is the Executive Director of Helping Paws, and she's on the line now. Thank you for joining us, Alyssa.

**ALYSSA** Thank you for having me.

**GOLOB:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Your organization worked closely, like we just mentioned, with the Hortmans. How are you all holding up?

**ALYSSA** It's been rough over here at Helping Paws. It's a tight community. There are many of our current volunteers that  
**GOLOB:** had a relationship with either Melissa, Mark, or Sophie, when they were training dogs for us. Last night, we let people come together and just be, telling stories. But it's been really hard. It's grief over something so senseless. And then you add the dog into it, and it's just unimaginable.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, you kind of got to see, you know, elected officials, we've been talking a lot about, they're just people. You know, these positions at the state capitol, they also have other jobs. And you got to see just people outside of their jobs. And I'm sure you get to see that a lot with people. How did the Hortmans first get involved with Helping Paws?

**ALYSSA** Yeah, so, their relationship with Helping Paws started in 2014, when Sophie came to Helping Paws as a senior in  
**GOLOB:** high school, and had to do a service project, and she wanted to help train a dog. So, she connected with Helping Paws. It takes two and a half years to train one of our service dogs. It's no small volunteer opportunity.

And, so, you know, Sophie was going to go to college, and at that time, we could make a decision to let someone else finish Gilbert's training. But Mark stepped in, and he said, I'm finishing the training of this dog. And he did. And that dog, Mini, was placed with one of our veterans with PTSD nine years ago, and he's almost 11 and a half, and is still working with her partner. And so that life has been forever changed.

And this selfless act of training that dog and giving it to someone two and a half years later says a lot about the Hortmans, as well as all of our volunteers. And then, four years later, Melissa came to us and wanted to train a service dog, and she got matched with Gilbert. She trained Gilbert for about two, two and a half years. Not all dogs are destined to be service dogs. Gilbert wanted to be a home dog, and he got to be the Hortman's home dog. And Gilbert is a sweet little fella, and they got to have him in their life for the last four years.

**INTERVIEWER:** I think what a lot of people love about dogs, including myself, is that they are just in the present moment. They don't have that ego, you know, that humans have. They just give love, and they just are there. You know, and so I actually understand that Gilbert was too friendly to be a working dog. Tell me a little bit about how that gets kind of determined with dogs over time.

**ALYSSA** Yeah, so, you know, we watch the dog for two and a half years. Our program staff does that, and we're looking  
**GOLOB:** for all things. We're looking for will they be better for the physical disabilities of a veteran, one of our facility dogs. They're looking at all of that. Then they have to take into consideration temperament. The dog might have allergies, and we can't give someone a dog who has allergies that they may have to maintain. But temperament is a big thing.

And it seemed Gilbert just would rather be with other dogs and play with other dogs, and was not destined to be a service dog. And that's OK. We believe every dog that has a purpose at Helping Paws, and we never make a dog do something they don't want to do. I often refer to it as your kids. Like, one goes off to college and one goes to the basement.

**INTERVIEWER:** (LAUGHING) Aw.

**ALYSSA** And we have to consider that, that it's not the right journey for every dog. And for Gilbert, it was not the right  
**GOLOB:** journey. But he certainly got to be in an incredibly loving home, with people who took care of him and loved him deeply.

**INTERVIEWER:** Mm-hmm. You mentioned briefly, Alyssa, about the vigil that you all had just last night. Would you talk a little bit about how that was, who was there, maybe a story somebody might have shared?

**ALYSSA** Yeah. So, for that, we did something small. We might do something again for the bigger community. But we  
**GOLOB:** invited anybody who trained a dog with Melissa, or Mark, or Sophie, because we just wanted them, that group, to have a time together. But one of our volunteers who was there, we've been in touch with him over the last several days, because he, actually, is a down-the-street neighbor of the Hortmans, and they actually have babysat each other's dogs when they were in training.

And what Jordy shared with us was that, you know, Melissa walked into the training center and was just Melissa. It wasn't Melissa Hortman, Speaker of the House. It wasn't Melissa Hortman, who just lobbied for a bill. It was just I'm here to train this dog. And he said, you know, like, she would be very jokey, and fun, and witty, and then, the minute class started, it was just her eye on Gilbert. So, very dedicated to what she was doing, and just very well thought of.

**INTERVIEWER:** I did read that former Speaker Hortman was kind of happy when Gilbert didn't necessarily graduate.

[LAUGHTER]

**ALYSSA** Yeah, I mean, look, I think there is some happiness in that. We joke with our foster home trainers that they really  
**GOLOB:** do have to train that dog, and the dog has set on for a purpose, and our mission is to place as many dogs with people who need them. But, you know, sometimes you get to keep the dog. And a dog that you bond-- I mean, two and a half years, every day, every week, coming to classes, that's a different bond than you might even have with your own, what we would call a "resident dog." Her bond with Gilbert was very, very deep.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yeah. You know, I obviously did not know the Hortmans personally, but I have heard a lot of people say that they would be so thrilled to see how the tragic events that occurred have led to people reaching out to organizations like yours and making a donation or giving their time. And so I understand that you have had this outpouring of support. What has that been like?

**ALYSSA** You know, like you said, to take a tragedy and try to find some light is tough. You know, in some weird ways, we almost feel guilty, you know, like, that we're benefiting from this tragedy. But we also see it as an opportunity to create a legacy for the Hortmans, and in honor of Sophie and Colin, and we hope we can do that. And we're doing everything possible to do this with integrity and grace, and really want to do right by the Hortman family.

But, yes, we have had an outpouring of love, and support, and financial support. You know, and one person said to me, like, Gilbert wasn't a Republican or a Democrat. He was a four-year-old Golden Retriever. And-- I'm sorry.

**INTERVIEWER:** It's OK.

**ALYSSA** And people want to honor them. And we're an organization that's just a part of a life that maybe people didn't about, with the Hortmans, and dogs resonate with people. And this dog, his life has just touched so many people, and that he was there for the Hortmans 'till the very end. And so we do appreciate the outpouring of love and support. And, again, we just hope we do good by it, and we hope we honor them in every way that they would feel was appropriate.

**INTERVIEWER:** I think you are, Alyssa.

**ALYSSA** Thank you.

**GOLOB:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you for coming by. I know was very difficult, but how wonderful to share about the work that you do that is so needed. Thank you. Thank you for your time.

**ALYSSA** Thank you for your time. We really appreciate the support we're getting from the community, and everyone really interested in this story and wanting to be part of the legacy of the Hortmans and Gilbert.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you, Alyssa. Take care. That was Alyssa Golob, the Executive Director of Helping Paws.