

September-October 2025

HEARTLAND

North Central Indiana Lifestyle Magazine

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FINDING LUCY'S WAY

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ROAD TO RECOVERY
WITH DOG BY
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PLUS MORE INSPIRING STORIES OF PETS AND THE PEOPLE WORKING TO SAVE THEM

FINDING 'Lucy's Way'

Dog led him through journey of addiction recovery

A personal story by MARK SALUKE

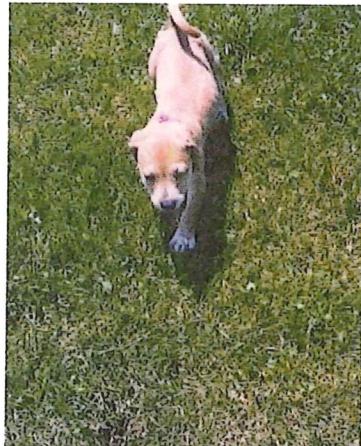
I never imagined a dog could mean so much, let alone save my life, but that was the case with Lucy Saluke.

Stuck in the hopeless despair of addiction, the window of joy had closed for me – and the door to my life appeared to be closing as well – when Lucy entered the picture in 2006.

She pawed her way through the messy final year of my addiction and was right beside me during the still-somewhat-messy first year of my journey into sobriety. She became a

catalyst of my recovery over the next several years, leading me to a better understanding of myself and my place in the world.

Eventually, those revelations landed on the pages of my debut memoir, "Lucy's Way: A Dog, A Drunk, and The Tao." Released in April, 2025, "Lucy's Way" ties the threads of pets, recovery, and Taoism into a unique tapestry. It's a story for animal lovers, for anyone who has dealt directly or indirectly with addiction, and for anyone who has



The first picture of Lucy, taken at two months old, just days after she entered our lives. She almost looks like she's strutting in this picture, as if she were saying, "Look out world, here I come."

ever sought simplistic spirituality.

A music lover, but one who can't sing or play an instrument, I approached this book as if I was making an album, each chapter standing on its own as a song that also contributed to the greater whole.

In that vein, I think Chapter Five "Digging Out," could have been a good first single. Following is an abridged version of that chapter. Happy reading, and I hope Lucy finds her way to you.



One of Lucy's favorite things with Mark was car rides. They usually led to somewhere fun like a park, but Mark realized over time that Lucy was enjoying every moment of the journey getting there, not just the arrival, a lesson he began to mirror in life. (photos provided)



Lucy and Mark on October 7, 2016, the day that the Chicago Cubs opened their playoff run that ended with a World Series crown. Mark was excited, while Lucy was obviously hesitant due to the Cubs history.



Even as the pain in my lower back works its way upward, I keep digging, one shovel after another, a growing urgency with each scoop despite seemingly little progress. All I keep telling myself is that I have got to get my driveway dug out so I can get my car out. It's February 2007, and several inches of snow have dumped down on Kokomo. With the drifting, there's at least a foot piled up and down my driveway. A few snow blowers echo faintly through the neighborhood but I can't wait for charity.

I'm certain, I keep telling myself, that once I shovel a few more inches out up and down the driveway, I can back my car over the remaining snow and I'll be able to navigate the roads. A few tire tracks are in the road, showing that it is passable if you get out into it. Schools are closed. Most workplaces other than those deemed emergency or essential are shut down for the day.



Mark Saluke does a book signing for "Lucy's Way" at the Barnes and Noble in Noblesville in July 2025.

But this is an emergency: I am miserable and need vodka.

Lucy's attitude toward this white world is a much different one.

Not quite a year old yet, this is the biggest snow she has witnessed, and she is in pure ecstasy.

When I let her out into the yard after digging out a wide square from the back door so she can move out far enough to do her business, she plunges headfirst into the snow until she is nearly buried.

As the snow slowly melts over the next few days, she moves about it more skillfully. She treats the back yard as a playground she's never witnessed, hopping in the snow like a rabbit, stopping at random spots and sticking her snout down into the snow as if she is preparing to blow bubbles in water. Instead, her snout becomes a shovel, pushing white tufts up into the air. She rises on her two hind legs for just a moment to admire the white crystals hanging in the air before she takes off in another direction.

She crisscrosses the yard in varying patterns, figure eights left behind in the snow as she moves on to another fresh spot. She runs from one side of the fence to the other, kicking snow up behind her, stopping at times to swat it backwards with her paws in a digging motion and then running some more, occasionally glancing over at me for approval. She doesn't stop until the snow is packed into the fur on her legs, frozen chunks hanging from the hair of her belly, ice frozen to her whiskers and purple collar.

A sign of things to come, she'll spend the next several winters dragging me behind her like a flailing snow skier with arms and legs made of noodles, slipping and sliding with a white knuckled grip as she yanks me through patterns she traces in the snow.

But right now, in this moment, I just keep digging. Fighting through the pain. Stopping here and there to take a break and

go inside to drink what little vodka I have left. Then back to digging out, one scoop at a time.

This is where we're at. Cindy took Jasper and moved out sometime in January. Heck, I even helped her move. I surely didn't want to live with me. I remember that move being the first time that Cindy had said that Lucy was more my girl and could stay with me. So here we are, just the two of us.

One of us is living their best life and one of us isn't.



With Lucy destroying the furniture, it got to a point where I had one large comfortable plush chair and two plastic green lawn chairs in my living room, lined up in front of a 13-inch television with three stations.

I would get home from work and start drinking. Then the day came that I stopped going to work because I was still too drunk in the mornings when it was time to head out.

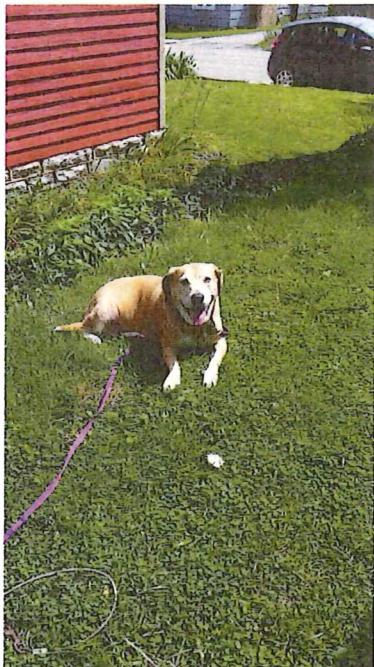
Those days were blurs but Lucy was still a priority. She gave me a purpose when it seemed there was nothing else to care about. Even though I had my parents and family, I had essentially shut them out aside from begging for money. I was ashamed, and even though I had a strong feeling that they already knew that things weren't good, I didn't want them to see me the way I was.

I kept Lucy well fed, played with her, threw her toys to her, gave her free rein while I was there, kept the door open for her to go off and explore in the back yard, drag more logs out, dig holes, eat bugs, chase squirrels — a dog's greatest joys.

I finally got another couch, a used one that the youth group at my old school had worn out. It was nothing to look at, but I threw a blanket over it and figured less would be lost if it became another victim of the Luminator.

As the weather got warmer and I'd leave the door open more for Lucy to come and go, I'd drink until I passed out on that couch, wasting days away. When I came to, Lucy would almost always be curled up next to me, worn out and sleeping peacefully, right by my side as if she were watching over me.

One afternoon, I came to and she was in her spot but



awake, giving me the side eye, the tail of a squirrel toy poking out from under her snout. I closed my eyes again and an instant later it hit me: Lucy had a lot of toys and none of them were a toy squirrel.

"Lucy!" I snapped to coherence, jumping up from the couch. Knowing the jig was up, she jumped to the floor, revealing the dead squirrel on the couch. During those next few moments I was animated, and she might well have thought I was celebrating what she had done, given all my arms-flailing and jumping around. But then I took her find outside and threw it over the fence into the neighbors' yard.

To this day, I don't know if she delivered the death blow to that squirrel, or it was already gone and she was trying to nurse it back to health.

I told her that day that I was going to start keeping a better eye on her, give her more attention. She had to drag a dead squirrel into the house. Is that what things had come to?

Also, Lucy knew I was sick. It was in the darkest days of my life that she curled up to me like a loyal companion, was always there beside me when I came to. She was being present with me even if I wasn't present. She gave me a reason to get up each sad morning. She was becoming the truest of companions, and I wanted to be the same for her.

But I felt so stuck and hopeless. The hole was getting deeper, and no matter how much I wanted to, I just couldn't dig myself out.



I can say with certainty that I had only been digging myself deeper when I touched down in California for my best friend John's wedding in late June, 2007.

John and I had been the best of friends from fifth grade through college and beyond. I knew there would be plenty of chances to drink during the wedding festivities once I touched down in San Jose. But as I tried to slow down my drinking a few days before hopping on the plane, I started feeling sick.

I had gotten used to playing this game with my life. If I didn't want the delirium tremens to start, I had to keep booze in me — hopefully to stay within the nebulous state of not being sick and not being sloshed.

I sat in the Indianapolis airport parking lot, crouched low





In 2018, Lucy reluctantly accepted a new brother, Buddy the Cat, into her life. While she often acted disinterested or annoyed with him, this photo catches her in the act of connecting with him.

in my car, and took several swallows off a plastic traveler's bottle of Dark Eyes vodka before hurriedly rushing inside and hopping on the plane. At my layover in Houston, I went to the airport bar and had several shots.

"Nervous flying?" the bartender asked. "Yes," I lied as he poured another shot.

The next several days were a blur. I remember the embarrassment of barely keeping it together in the midst of an ongoing party. I'd drink my fill into the middle of the night, but then have to sneak drinks from morning until the

following evening to keep it together.

Somehow, I pulled myself together enough for John's big day. After writing my toast ahead of time, I felt good about it — and I felt good about composing myself long enough for John's big moment.

On the trip home, an impending sense of doom grew worse. After all, this was my last hurrah. I had promised myself this was the last party, the last drink. Cindy had watched Lucy while I was gone, taking her to her place. When I called Cindy drunk the day after arriving in California, she told me that Lucy was not coming back to me.

I promised to get myself together. And then I got so drunk that last morning that I don't even remember my goodbye with John though I do recall him seeming to be frustrated and ready to scoot me out of his life.

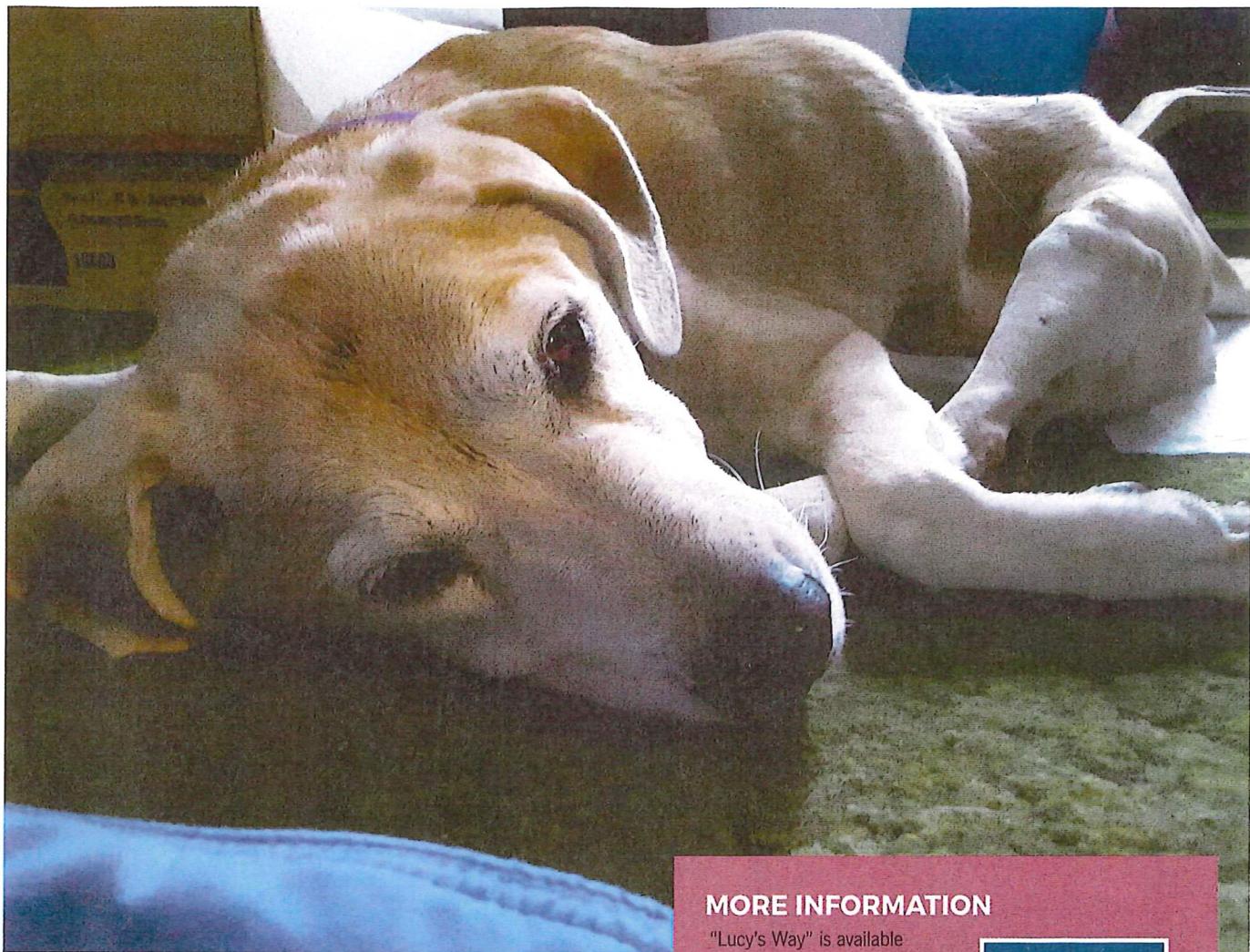
On the trip home I was passed out for most of my first flight, coming to with the guy next to me staring at me in dis-



Lucy on her 10th birthday, ready to head into the pet store for treats. While she was spoiled every day, she had dad trained to go the extra mile on birthdays.



Lucy enjoys one of her favorite spots, the banks of the Mississippi River in Grant County. The river, and this park, are prevalent in the storyline of 'Lucy's Way.'



The final photo of Lucy, taken on Dec. 14, 2020. She was 14 and a half years old when she passed away, leaving Mark the memories of a wonderful journey, and the seed of an idea that became "Lucy's Way."

gust. I hit the airport bar in Minneapolis, grabbed a few shots and got back on the plane home to Indianapolis, touching down sometime after dark.

It was Fourth of July weekend, blistering hot. My car had been sitting in the Indianapolis airport parking lot for several days in no shade.

I hopped in the car and reached into the back seat for the vodka. One, two, three, four swigs without a breath, the hot vodka burning down my throat even more from sitting in the heat.

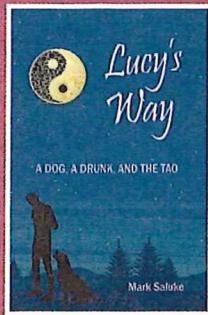
I wasn't going to stop until I was dead. I felt like now I had even lost Lucy. I knew I'd still see her as Cindy and I were working on patching things up. But she wasn't my sole responsibility anymore and my purpose was gone.

Maybe it was best that way. When I did finally drink myself to death she wouldn't be left unattended.

The alcoholic life had carved me into a misshapen form. I didn't yet understand that I could become uncarved again,

MORE INFORMATION

"Lucy's Way" is available through Amazon as well as other online retailers including Barnes and Noble, Books A Million, Walmart, and many more retailers. Links to purchase books are also available at www.lucy-books.com, a landing spot for all things "Lucy's Way," including upcoming events and fundraisers, blog updates, and galleries celebrating an ongoing bond with this special dog.



that I could regain a sense of wonder and that Lucy could guide me there, Poo guiding me back to P'u. I could live in simplicity, in the flow of the universe, in an ongoing relationship with my higher power. I could know all of these things and Lucy would help teach them to me.

But to get all of these things, I was going to have to dig myself out of where I was.

Little did I know on the dark and empty drive home that night, I was about to be handed the shovel. -end-

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