

Support Dogs' charity magazine

Aura

Autumn 2020/Winter 2021

Edition 37

“Berry has been the most life changing gift that anyone has ever given us”

Emma, mother of JJ, who has autism.

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Support dogs saving lives through the pandemic

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Tiny pooch Tinkerbell is turning life around for disability client Charli

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For Autism. For Epilepsy. For Disability

Could you volunteer with Support Dogs?

Volunteering with our trainee dogs and puppies

We are looking for volunteers living within an hour of our centre in Sheffield to help us with our trainee dogs and puppies. Roles include:

- Puppy socialisers looking after a pup full time from your home for their first 14 months.
- Bed and Breakfast foster carers providing a loving home in evenings and at weekends for a trainee support dog.
- Doggy drivers helping transport our dogs to and from our training centre.
- Adult dog socialisers providing full time care from home for an older dog before their training begins.

Find out more at www.supportdogs.org.uk or phone 0114 261 7800



Do you know a dog who needs rehoming?



1 in 4 of the dogs we train join us from rescue centres or as rehomed dogs. Our charity is looking for dogs with potential to become life changing support dogs. If you have a dog aged between 10 months & 3 years you are looking to rehome please call 0114 261 7800 or visit www.supportdogs.org.uk

Once you have finished enjoying this magazine please put it somewhere where others can read and learn about the work of our charity

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MESSAGE FROM RITA...

A forgotten reality

Our lives and media attention this year have of course been dominated by one issue. However, for those families and individuals affected by epilepsy or autism or conditions such as MS, fibromyalgia or cerebral palsy, the challenges have remained at best the same and for many have become more significant.

Statistics showing how three people every day in the UK die from epileptic seizures, the huge impact that autism has on a family's mental and physical health, and the isolation that so many living with physical disabilities feel, have simply not disappeared.

This is why we have focused our resources and redoubled our commitment to help and improve and save the lives of those affected by these conditions, despite the challenges we are facing. The reality of living with these conditions may seem to have been forgotten by the media this year, but not by our charity or our service users.

In a survey conducted over the summer, our service users told us of the life-changing impact our support dogs have had on them and on their families. Over 90% of our clients told that their care needs (provided by family or NHS) have reduced as a result of having a support dog. A quarter of our service users have also told us that their medication has also reduced after being matched with their support dog. One hundred per cent of our service users say their mental health has improved, with 94% stating that their perspective of what they can achieve in life has also changed.

The impact of a support dog on the wider family was also highlighted by service users. Over three quarters say that the number of care hours they received from their children or partner has reduced since having a support dog. A third tell us that their partners are more easily able to work because of the support given by their dog, 60% state their partner's mental health has improved and 50% that their partners physical health has improved



Rita with support dog Zip.

since their support dog was placed with them.

The impact of Covid on our resources has been huge. We rely 100% on voluntary donations, but this year income has been hit by the cancellation of fundraising events and the financial constraints of our supporters, resulting in our income dropping by a third compared with the same period last year. We are all hoping for a brighter 2021.

I do hope you are inspired by some of the stories you read in this magazine. Please do get in touch if you think you could help our charity grow its resources and help more people.

Rita Howson

Chief executive

About Support Dogs

It's Support Dogs' passion and commitment to ensure that people affected by autism, epilepsy and physical disability can enjoy a greater level of independence. We aim to do this by providing, training and supporting registered assistance dogs.

We provide:

Autism assistance dogs for children aged three to ten years with autism. The dogs are trained to provide safety for the child and reduce stress in social environments.

Seizure alert dogs for people with epilepsy. The dogs are trained to provide a hundred per cent reliable, 10-55 minute warning prior to the onset of an epileptic seizure, which enables them to get to a place of their choosing and take control of the situation.

In some instances it has been reported that seizure alert dogs have also been shown to reduce seizure frequency.

Disability assistance dogs for people with physical disabilities. The client's own pet dog is trained to perform tasks which are specifically tailored to their individual needs; examples of these tasks include:

- Opening and closing doors
- Raising the alarm
- Fetching the post
- Loading and unloading the washing machine
- Assisting with dressing and undressing

Support Dogs is a registered charity and does not charge for its services. However we rely entirely on voluntary donations and receive no government funding.

Chief Executive: Rita Howson

Chair: Barry Brackner

Honorary President: Angela Rippon CBE

Patrons: The Earl & Countess of Scarborough
Elaine Paige OBE

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To sponsor a dog today call Support Dogs on

0114 261 7800

to donate visit

www.supportdogs.org.uk

Amazing Giles gives Natasha the power to work

Thanks to disability assistance dog Giles, former soldier Natasha has switched to a successful career in the NHS.

At the age of 18 Natasha Lees had a place at Sandhurst and promising career in the army lined up. But an injury to her spine while on military exercise in the Falklands put a stop to that.

For years Natasha struggled to lead a normal, active life but constant back pain, other related physical and mental health problems and regular surgery made working a major challenge.

That was until an English Springer Spaniel called Giles came into her life as her disability assistance dog trained by Support Dogs.

And now Natasha credits the deceptively fluffy but devoted and hard-working pooch with enabling her to once again lead a fulfilling professional life working for the NHS.

Explains Natasha: "I have degenerative disc disease after injuring my back while on military exercise in the Falklands 18 years ago, when I was an 18-year-old army reservist. It stopped me becoming a full-time soldier. I had a place at Sandhurst and a career path mapped out but the injury put a stop to that.

"Since then I have been under the care of a spinal consultant, and it's got worse over the years. I was always very active and I carried on playing rugby and horse riding but by my early 20s the injury got worse and I had to stop. I also have balance problems due to hypermobility in my ankles, which is aggravated by the spinal injury, and have had ligament reconstruction to try and stop me falling over so much!"

Natasha had regular epidurals, disc blocks and spinal operations, including spinal decompression and spinal fusion surgery.

"My mobility is incredibly variable, I

can walk sometimes but not others. On bad days I get by with a walking stick and a huge amount of painkillers but I have been in the position where rely on a mobility scooter or can need a wheelchair post-surgery," she says.

A few years ago, Natasha, now 37, found her levels of pain were becoming unsustainable. She says: "I was living on my own getting really stressed and not being able to do anything, worried about something happening, and had no day-to-day support around me. So I went out and got a rescue dog, one year old, as a pet."



Enter Giles, a 'soft and fluffy, very gentle friendly sausage who loves cuddles,' The intelligent Springer had already shown great promise training with Natasha in local dog training classes, but then really upped his game and more importantly quickly took to training with Support Dogs' as a disability assistance dog.



"I was blown away by how the trainers and instructors moved Giles on, and the things they been able to teach him," says Natalie. "I had only seen basic dog training before, but they have been able to bring something out of Giles to turn him into a really special dog."

Because of her back, Natasha struggles to bend down and pick things up, so doing that for her is one of Giles' biggest priorities. He's also trained to find Natasha's phone in the house so if anything happens she can call for help. He opens and closes doors, loads and unloads the washing machine, fetches the post – and even tidies up after himself!

"As I live alone, Giles being able to find my phone if anything happens to me is amazing, but Giles also gave me the confidence to start going out and about again as he is trained to fetch help if I fall over when I'm out, so that's a really important safety aspect," says Natasha. "As he is an English Springer not a Labrador in a blue jacket he always gets lots of attention outside the house. He loves it!"

But as well as being a model support dog inside and outside the home, Natasha credits Giles most with enabling her to continue to work.

Despite her ill-health she has managed to stay in work since graduating. First in the HM Prison Service in HR project management and commissioning, and



Natasha and Giles at the Support Dogs' training centre following their successful graduation as a disability assistance partnership.

currently as a programme management office operations manager with the NHS in Mansfield and Ashfield Clinical Commissioning Group.

"Until lockdown Giles came to work with me every day and everyone in the office loves him," says Natasha. "He's the office celebrity who is always up for a belly rub but I had to watch he doesn't get too many snacks! People would come up and ask me for a cuddle with him after a bad day at work. He's been missing all that since I've been working from home.

She adds: "My health has worsened over the last few years to a point where I have needed more and more medical support and I genuinely believe the reason I stayed in work since moving to Nottinghamshire despite all the surgery, mental and physical health issues is Giles. He has kept me on an even keel. He is the reason I get up in the morning, he helps me get through each and every day and he is the reason I am still employed."

Natasha and Giles relocated from the city to be closer to work and now live in a bungalow in Mansfield Woodhouse, which is more suitable for Natasha's health needs but also has big back garden backing onto a nature reserve so that Giles can always get the exercise he needs.

"Support Dogs has been a really positive experience – they are so good at supporting us in every way, tailoring the training to what we need, rather than being a one-size-fits-all charity," she says.

"The idea of going out without Giles is unthinkable; he is indispensable, an extension of me. He is my favourite thing and I love him to bits! Support Dogs have transformed him from a pet into an asset that allows me to work.."

For more information about our disability assistance programme go to www.supportdogs.org.uk

YOU can be amazing in 2021

Help us **change the lives** of those with autism, epilepsy and disability by taking part in these brilliant challenges. We are on hand to help you plan your event and support you to take it online. Get in touch with us on fundraising@supportdogs.org.uk or 0114 2617800.

Fundraising Ultra Challenge Series

From the Isle of Wight, to the Lake District, the **Ultra Challenge Series** has 14 fantastic events from April to September. For each challenge there are three distance options **25 km, 50 km, or 100 km.**

You can opt to **walk, jog, or run** it.

Do your challenge as a **team** or an **individual.**

We have highlighted 3 of these fantastic events below...

All events are fully Covid-secure, with the format inspected.



Jurassic Coast Challenge 15th May 2021

Dorset's fabulous Jurassic Coast provides a stunning setting for this challenge - It's up and down through Lulworth Cove, past Portland Bill and the Chesil Beach to West Bay's sandstone cliffs with some glorious views en route!



Peak District Challenge 3rd July 2021

Exploring both the Dark and White Peak, you will walk along gritstone edges, through limestone dales and alongside rivers and brooks. Starting and finishing in the pretty town of Bakewell, this is a challenge not to be missed!



The Peak District Abseil Challenge 27th March 2021

We are looking for brave volunteers to take on our Peak District Abseil challenge. We ask brave volunteers to raise a minimum of £50 for the charity, there is also the option to do it dressed in a dog outfit. Visit www.supportdogs.org.uk/abseil

All our challenges for 2021:

- | | |
|---------------------|------------------------------|
| 10 April | Windsor Easter walk |
| 1 May | Isle of Wight Challenge |
| 15 May | Jurassic Coast Challenge |
| 29 May | London to Brighton Challenge |
| 12 June | Lake District Challenge |
| 26 June | Cotswold Way Challenge |
| 3 July | Peak District Challenge |
| 17 July | Yorkshire Challenge |
| 24 July | South West Coast to Coast |
| 7 August | Isle of Man Challenge |
| 4 September | South Coast Challenge |
| 11 September | Thames Path Challenge |
| 11 September | Thames Bridges Trek |
| 25 September | Chiltern Challenge |

For more fundraising ideas and events visit www.supportdogs.org.uk

A BIG THANK YOU to all you fantastic fundraisers

2020 has been a challenging year for fundraising so we are privileged to have some amazing supporters who give up their time, skills and energy to raise funds to enable our charity to continue with our work. There are so many more people we wish to thank but sadly there just isn't enough room.

Jamie Evans aka 'Dr Jevans' raised **£2,009** from with 24-hour gaming marathon on Twitch.

June Woodhead who hand-made 200 face-masks during lockdown raising over **£500.**

Family and friends who have beaten their target of **raising £8,000** in memory of **Chris High.** Between them they have taken part in a skydive, shaved their heads, baked cakes and given generously. Fantastic!

Ivanhoe Masonic Lodge in Sheffield who **donated a generous £20,000** to pay for the two-year specialised training of a support dog - appropriately named Ivanhoe.

Jodie who faced her fears with a skydive and raised a high-flying **£675!**

Patrick, Nik, Ashley, Freddie, James, Leonie, Victoria, Ollie, Dan and Sarah who completed 26.2 miles from their homes for the virtual London Marathon raising a whopping **£4,959!**

Tris who ran his own half marathon when Reading half marathon was cancelled raising a brilliant **£470.**

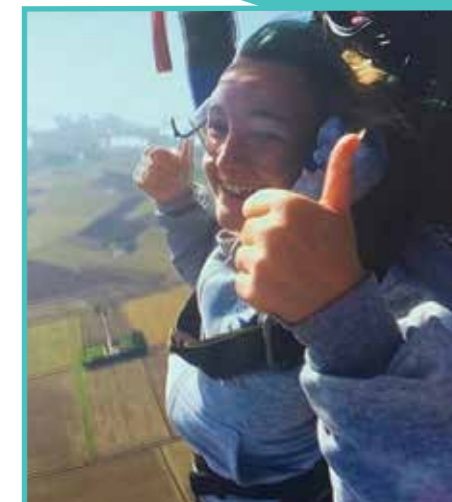
Sherlock, Bailey, Chess, Toffee, John, Zeus, Whiskey, Maple, Barney and Bramble (and their owners!) who took part in our Doggy Olympics raising over **£2,000!**

Kieran, Gregory, Alice, Barclay, Jack and Ashley who took part in a 24-hour gaming marathon raising a superb **£1,225.**

Melissa from Love Yogi who sold lovely dog treat boxes in aid of our work, donating **£50.**

Members of Stockport Rotary Club who **donated £530** to Support Dogs as the club was closing.

Joseph and his dog Barney who conquered the national Three Peaks Challenge raising over **£1,250!**



Facing her fears Jodie jumps out of a plane and raises money for Support Dogs.

Jean Pearson and members of Hall Green Inner Wheel who raised a fantastic **£646** for Support Dogs as their chosen charity for the year.

Geoff and Hazel Perry who have **donated a blooming £180** from sales from a flower stall.

Everyone at Llanelen Folk Dance Group who **donated a foot-tapping £50!**

Members of the 54th Sheffield Rainbows who asked for 50p every time they did something kind, raising a brilliant **£150.** That is a lot of kind things!

If you are inspired to help our charity email fundraising@supportdogs.org.uk

Winter virtual fundraising Join in from the warmth of your home



Gogglebox's Steph and Dom Parker.



Raheel Mizra from Masterchef.

SANTA PAWS WALK, Sunday 6th December. What better way to raise funds than a sponsored walk, especially with your canine pal wherever you live. We hope to have people taking part across the country! To enter visit our website www.supportdogs.org.uk/santapawswalk

CHRISTMAS VIRTUAL QUIZ hosted by **Steph and Dom Parker, stars of TV's Gogglebox, Thursday 10th December 7pm.** Join us for an evening of fun and prizes. Entry costs £10. To enter go to our website www.supportdogs.org.uk/Event/christmasquiz

Warm up your winter evening with a DELICIOUS COOK-ALONG with MasterChef's Raheel Mirza. Thursday 3rd December at 6pm. Sheffield-based chef Raheel Mirza wowed the judges during MasterChef 2020 and is now kindly donating his skills to present this live cook-along of a delicious chicken korma recipe. It's just £10 to join and we'll send you a full ingredients list ahead of the night. Use the link to sign up: <https://www.supportdogs.org.uk/cookalong>

Support dogs - providing vital care through lock down

The past few months of the Covid-19 pandemic have been unprecedented and thrown up many challenges for our clients, particularly children with autism, whose routines have been turned upside down.

For Emma Mills, mother of youngster Sam, who has autism, lock down plunged the family into yet another period of uncertainty and worry.

The story of Sam and his autism assistance dog Willow was featured on the BBC's The Big Night earlier this year, showing how the pandemic had affected the young boy and his family, and how Willow was providing much-needed support throughout that time.

Sam, who also suffers from anxiety and depression, had made enormous progress since qualifying as a Support Dogs' partnership with Willow two years ago. But mum Emma was concerned that all that progress was unravelling.

"We had a really difficult lock down"

says Emma. "It was not easy and Sam went back to square one. He ended up going back to school five weeks before the school holidays for his own safety.

"It's like everything we've done over the past couple of years had been for nothing. It sounds a bit dramatic, but we spent a long time with Willow getting Sam's confidence up in leaving the house and feeling safe to do that. Then we had to say it wasn't safe to leave the house, so we went backwards in everything we worked for.

"It was difficult to see him become so anxious again and getting depressed again as he had found a new love of going out and doing things and then he couldn't do that. He couldn't touch

anything in the playground, or see his granny and grandad. It was so confusing for him.

"For a child with autism any kind of change is difficult. It takes time, it takes preparation. The lock down isn't anything we could have prepared for. It ripped away all of his support, and precise routine which worked so well. He felt like his world had crumbled."

Sam's dad Steve has a chronic health condition which meant Covid-19 was especially worrying for the family.

Says Emma: "Sam understands it quite well - he knows it's a virus and that because his dad has COPD that he is high risk and it would be dangerous for him to get it. So he has been shielding



JJ and autism assistance dog Berry with JJ's pavement lock down message.



Sam with his beloved autism assistance dog Willow.

and that's fine because we haven't been going anywhere."

Sam now has his own bedroom in the loft of his family's Sheffield home with a bathroom and his own space. He has a double bed so there is room for Willow to sleep there with him - and she is the only one allowed to be up there with him.

"I don't know what we would do without Willow. She is Sam's constant and he clings to her," Emma adds. "She will cuddle him; she gets him out in the garden and play with a ball and makes him laugh. If we do go for a walk he wouldn't go if Willow wasn't there, because she makes him feel safe and she distracts him when he is feeling down. It's as if she knows what he needs.

"Willow is like my left arm now! I know now that I can leave Willow with Sam and that will keep him calm if I need to get my daughter Ellie into bed or in the shower. It's like an extra pair of hands. Willow has been a life saver during this awful time."

Life for our disability clients during the pandemic has also thrown up another challenge - how to keep their dogs fit and stimulated if they couldn't leave the house.

For Sheila Craik, (pictured right) who self-isolated for months due to her and husband's health, it was a real worry that her disability assistance dog Mitch

couldn't get his regular 45 minutes of daily exercise.

Sheila, who conquered agoraphobia when she got Mitch, and developed an active social life, also feared that lock down might put her back to square one, unable to leave the house, but was more worried for Mitch's welfare.

Happily, the tips provided by the Support Dogs' training team on how to keep dogs active and stimulated proved immensely helpful.

"Having to give Mitch some exercise and stimulation meant I had to have focus and a routine to make sure I had time for him several times a day which was a good thing for me mentally and prevented me vegetating," says Sheila. "And Mitch helped me though this. Just by being here he cheered me up and I feel so thankful to have him."

Another disability assistance client Andrea Jack also welcome the help provided by the Support Dogs' training team during the pandemic.

She says: "Support Dogs remained in close contact with me through all of this. I have had several direct phone calls and emails to make sure everything is ok with me and with Ruby. I've received lots of helpful tips on keeping Ruby healthy, exercised and entertained. Support Dogs clients had a dedicated online support group and that has been great too.

Meanwhile Labradoodle Ruby has provided invaluable canine support.

Amanda adds: "Whilst Ruby and I couldn't go out 'in jacket' at the moment, she continued to help me with physical tasks around the house and she's kept me active in order to keep her happy. She remains my guardian angel and just her presence is so calming. Ruby doesn't know about coronavirus, so she just looks at me like she always has ... with love and wondering if there's anything she can do to help me. Ruby is like a connection to 'normality' because she's not stressed out by anything, not even all the craziness in the world just now. I don't know what I'd do without her."

Lock down has also thrown up many challenges for our seizure alert clients, who live with epilepsy (see pages 14 for how client Brogan has coped during the pandemic). In a recent Support Dogs' survey, one seizure alert client summed up many people's feelings about their extraordinary four-legged friends.

"At moments of feeling down, or anxious and depressed, my support dog always manages to make me smile and lift my spirits," she said. "Our dogs don't know about Covid-19. They can't understand what the news is reporting or what's being shared on social media. My support dog feels like my connection to 'normal' and a world without Covid - and I'm so grateful."



Find out more about Support Dogs at www.supportdogs.org.uk

JJ AND BERRY – A VERY SPECIAL BOND

The youngster with autism and the yellow Labrador have been best friends since they day they were matched.

June 3 2019 is a date that Emma Gilman will always remember.

Her eight-old son JJ, who has autism, was due to be 'matched' with Berry, a very special dog that had the potential to transform his young life.

Emma and JJ had been on Support Dogs' waiting list for an autism assistance dog since 2017.

Finally a dog had been identified that could work effectively with JJ, keep him safe, provide a calming presence, and ease his path into adolescence.

Matching an autistic child with an autism assistance dog can take time as they don't always click as a partnership. The way a child and dog respond to each other has to be right, but to Emma's considerable relief, boy and dog hit it off straight away.

"Tracey the senior instructor brought Berry to meet JJ, and they started to play together," says Emma. "JJ and Berry just instantly had this amazing connection and Tracey said she was thrilled by that. I am not naturally a doggy person, but even I could tell there was something special."

That was just the start of a deep and hugely rewarding relationship for JJ and the Berry the yellow Labrador who was to become the youngster's closest companion. The pair qualified as an autism assistance partnership in February 2020.

Before Berry became part of the Gilman family, JJ's life was a difficult one and the young boy displayed some very challenging behaviour. Mum Emma and dad Kieran knew there was something wrong with their son from the age of just over a year old, when he didn't start to walk or talk.

JJ was diagnosed with global development delay when he was two and a half, and shortly after with autism



JJ with mum Emma and autism assistance dog Berry.

and ADHD. Although he is verbal, unlike many children with autism, JJ also has other health problems including a brain malformation and chronic pain, for which he has to take many painkilling drugs, and has lots of allergies.

Explains Emma: *"Cognitively JJ is very bright but his ability to transfer his skills is almost zero. Nothing he learns can he put into practice in everyday life. Everything is black and white. He has shocking anxiety. Socially and emotionally he is about four. He has not made any progress and is unlikely to make any progress. He struggles to focus or sit still; he is always jiggling about. But he's amazing. When you think of all the things he has to deal with, I'm in awe."*

Since pre-school JJ has been granted one-to-one support. He finds it hard to make friends, although children at his current school are very tolerant, and the school is very understanding of his complex needs.

His parents were determined to provide as much help and support for their son as possible. *"I went online and tried to find out how to help my kid – I wanted to know*

what was out there," says Emma. *"That's when I found Support Dogs, registered our interest, and was invited to an open day. After being accepted into the autism programme, and JJ was matched with Berry, I spent two weeks in Sheffield for the start of the training which was great fun. I went there to get a dog for my son and got a life-changing gift. Berry was brilliant and everything went absolutely to plan."*

So what does Berry do for JJ that makes such a difference to his life?

"She gives him confidence," says Emma. *"JJ would not leave the house – we had a torrid time with him and getting him to go to school was awful. Having Berry gives him something to focus on and so he doesn't have to think about being frightened or anxious when leaving the house. Berry walks to school with him to the gates and sometimes goes into assembly with him."*

"The safety aspect is also very important. We walk to the kerb and Berry stops. Nine times out of ten JJ sits down at the kerb with her, gives her a cuddle then walks on!"

"Sometimes take Berry with me when I go to the shops or take her for a walk. She is like two different dogs. When she's with me and JJ and has her jacket on, she is like a robot."

"She is not there to put his washing in the washing machine or open doors," adds Emma firmly. *"She is there to love him and let him love her with no expectations."*

"Sometimes JJ just wants to sit on the settee and she will lie with him, and they have a cuddle. He wants to be with her all the time. When JJ's in bed Berry will follow me around the house like my little shadow but if JJ is in the house, she will be with him."

"He absolutely adores her. His job is to feed her – which gives him some responsibility, and he rarely has to be asked or cajoled. My elder son Morgan, aged 19, is a huge dog person and adores her too. I think he's



Picture by: Jade Tideswell

Best friends - JJ with Berry.

a little bit jealous that she's JJ's dog...

"JJ will tell you that he loves Berry best of everybody. "I love Berry - a million, gazillion trezillion times. I love mummy and daddy – one!"

During lock down the ten-year-old regressed because he was frightened and didn't want to go out, but without Berry it would have been so much worse.

Says Emma: *"The last six months have been horrendous. JJ has found life particularly difficult, the uncertainty and sudden changes in routine are extremely difficult for those with autism. I can*

honestly say that I don't think we would have got through it without Berry. It has still been very difficult, but she has given JJ a reason to smile every day and someone to cuddle and love when life is just too much!"

The Gilmans are well aware that JJ will always have problems, but with Berry by his side he will be able to cope. And although JJ still has meltdowns, he has had fewer since Berry came along to calm him down.

"She doesn't suddenly make everything go away - he is still autistic – but she just

makes it easier to deal with," says Emma. *"She gives JJ a focus and you can't put a price on that."*

"I can't imagine what life would be like without Berry; she's one of the family. It's as if she has always been here, and I can't believe what life was like before. She is one of the family. She has been the most life-changing gift that anyone has ever given us."

"We will never be able to repay Support Dogs for what they have done for us. Berry has transformed JJ's life."

Little – but life-changing



Tinkerbell in a typically cheeky pose.

She may be tiny, but the impact Tinkerbell has made on the life of owner Charli is anything but.

The best things come in little packages, goes the saying, and Charli Colquhoun knows that better than most.

The bundle of fluff came into Charli's life at her lowest ebb, following the deaths of her grandma and granddad, and her previous pet dog Max.

Charli, now 36, had been diagnosed with a progressive genetic condition called Ehlers Danlos syndrome a decade previously, which had ended a promising career in the TV and film business. It left her isolated, dependent on others,

reliant on crutches and a wheelchair, and feeling depressed.

The arrival of the Lhasa Apso and her subsequent training by Support Dogs to become Charli's devoted disability assistance dog has made life worth living again, as she picks up the pieces and contemplates her future with real hope.

Ehlers Danlos syndrome causes hypermobile, painful joints, also affects the digestion and leads to dizziness and fatigue. It is a chronic, incurable condition, difficult to treat and manage.

Charli has had the condition – undiagnosed – since a young age, but she believes because she was so sporty

– doing gymnastics, dancing, horse-riding and swimming as a child – her muscles and joints maintained their strength.

But at the age of 13, while running in a race at school, her hip dislocated. From that point on her stamina reduced and she tired easily, although she still wasn't officially diagnosed for another 14 years – common in people with this rare condition.

"I was working on a film doing night shoots and one night I just collapsed," recalls Charli, who started as a runner working on Nigella's Kitchen, then became a production assistant in the BBC's children's department before switching to low-budget independent films.

"I was working 16-hour days, six days a week, and it was too much. I had vitamin D deficiency which I put down to working nights, and problems with my gut – which turned out to be Crohn's disease. Finally the doctors put all these things together and diagnosed me with Ehlers' Danlos.

"I had to stop working. I was really, really poorly and was on lots of different medication. I had some dark times, and felt useless that I couldn't go out and work.

Mum Suzi adds: *"Charli became very insular after her diagnosis and I was extremely worried about her. She stopped going out and lost a lot of confidence."*

When Charli heard about Support Dogs three years ago, she decided to apply. She had recently acquired a small dog called Max as a pet who she thought would make an ideal disability assistance dog.

"I only wanted a small dog as I live in a tiny flat in Paddington and needed the dog to pick things up for me, find things, and open doors," says Charli. "I get very dizzy and find bending over very difficult."

She was accepted by Support Dogs and was all set to start training, but Max developed gastroenteritis and sadly died at the age of just 22 months.

"Tinkerbell means the world to me. I wasn't going out at all, but she makes it possible"

Charli was told that if she got another pup quickly they could still train it to be an assistance dog, and when Charli found Tinkerbell she knew she was exactly the right dog for her. *"She stole my heart,"* she says.

At just 12 months old Tinkerbell was accepted onto the training programme and picked everything that was required of her very quickly.

Charli and Tinkerbell qualified as a partnership just before lock down this year.

Tinkerbell provides Charli with invaluable help around her flat. She picks up her keys, which are attached to big dog-friendly knots, finds and fetches her phone, opens and closes doors with a piece of rope, fetches the post, and goes for help if needed.

And of course, there's that all-important companionship. *"I had some really dark, hard times, of feeling useless, not being able to go out or to work, but having Tinkerbell and that extra company she provides makes everything better,"* says Charli.

Her mum Suzi – with whom Charli spent lock down shielding because of her



Charli and Tinkerbell are a great disability assistance partnership.

condition and the medication she was on – adds: *"Tinkerbell has been brilliant because Charli has to take her out in her wheelchair and the dog is so cute she encourages strangers to chat and that's boosted her confidence.*

"Tinkerbell basically gives her confidence so that she doesn't need me, and has enabled her to go into places that she wouldn't previously have dreamed of going. She's changed her life for the better. I'm so proud!"

Adds Charli. *"Tinkerbell means the*

world to me. I wasn't going out at all, but she makes it possible, and that there is less chance of something happening to me. I would only ever go out with mum or if a friend came round but now I feel I can be more confident because I have the support on Tinkerbell. She has made a massive difference to my life, and I'm enormously grateful to Support Dogs."

Find out more about Support Dogs' disability assistance programme at www.supportdogs.org.uk/disability-assistance



Brogan and Wadsley prove epilepsy doesn't need to be a barrier

While many were trying to get through the boredom of lock down Support Dogs' epilepsy seizure alert client Brogan Evans was determined to put herself through her toughest-ever challenge - while raising money for the charity that changed her life.

Brogan, aged 24, who has epilepsy, decided to take on a triathlon over the summer, with her seizure alert dog Wadsley by her side. Wadsley is trained and supported by Support Dogs to give Brogan a 100% reliable 48-minute advance warning of an oncoming seizure.

The pair climbed the height of Kilimanjaro by climbing the stairs over a two-week period, ran 5k every day for a month, and rowed the length of the river Mersey in two weeks.

And thanks to contributions from family and friends, Brogan raised more than £1,400 for Support Dogs. Brogan was especially proud that her fastest time for running 5K came despite having just had a seizure before-hand, thanks to the warning Wadsley gave her.

She says: "I didn't want to fail this challenge or let any of our sponsors down. Whenever I had a down day and told myself I'm not strong enough, I thought back to that moment. Without a doubt it was the hardest physical and mental challenge I have ever faced."

"But I didn't miss a single day! I'd do my run or row and then go to rugby or circuit training in the evening, and it was as physically and mentally as demanding for Wadsley as it was for me.

"It was mentally tedious, and on days where I wanted to do nothing other than sit on the sofa eating rubbish, I had to get up, show up and never give up! But it couldn't be for a more important cause. Wadsley, my seizure alert dog trained by this amazing charity, has changed my life."

Brogan, aged 24, who is married and lives in Birkenhead, qualified as a Support Dogs' seizure alert partnership with Wadsley last year, and since then has managed to return to leading the active, independent lifestyle that she had to give up after developing epilepsy at the age of 17.

Of lock down she says: "Lock down was a scary, uncertain time. Along with having epilepsy, I also am on the autistic spectrum, so having to be off work, on furlough, for



Brogan and her trusty seizure alert dog Wadsley after their record-breaking 5k run.

almost seven months, caused a massive disruption to my daily routine.

"Having Wadsley and getting to leave the house each day for his walk brought some normality into my life and actually reduced my stress levels.

"With him I still had to get up each day at the same time, had to get out into the world and that prevented me from falling into a deep dark hole that I know a lot of people were victim of.

With the help of Wadsley I was able to not only complete this sponsored event

but work on my own fitness, physical and mental wellbeing, and I even lost a stone!"

And thanks to her newfound enthusiasm for rigorous exercise, Brogan's lock down experience has had a positive outcome.

"In lock down I found a new passion," says Brogan. "And now me and my giant ginger loon are both enrolled to our local college to complete a level 3 personal trainer qualification."

For more information on our epilepsy seizure alert programme go to www.supportdogs.org.uk



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Work with us to save and change lives together.

We are looking for businesses to join us & create life changing partnerships, while also having a tangible impact on your staff and customers. To learn more contact Chris Daykin on chris.daykin@supportdogs.org.uk

supportdogs
For Autism, For Epilepsy, For Disability

New corporate partnership to keep our dogs healthy

Support Dogs have announced a new corporate partnership that will keep its dogs in tip-top shape - and save the charity £12,000 a year.

Elanco Animal Health who are providing a parasite support scheme, which includes the provision of selected parasite products to every one of our support dogs.

Routine parasite protection is important to help ensure our dogs remain healthy and can provide the essential support that's needed by their owners.

As part of the partnership, Support Dogs will be assisting Elanco to raise awareness for their 'Act at home against lungworm' campaign.

Chris Daykin, Support Dogs' corporate fundraising manager, said: "We are proud to partner with Elanco Animal

Health and very grateful for this gesture of support. The financial saving has a huge impact for a small charity like ours and provides a tremendous boost for us during a difficult time."

Emma Mapletoft, Elanco animal health corporate business manager, added: "We are thrilled to have been able to set up this special partnership with Support Dogs. The work they do for the individuals lives that have been affected in such profound ways is incredible.

"Elanco are very proud to be able offer preventive health care to all of the Support Dogs from puppies to fully-grown working dogs."



Trainer Claire Campbell is pictured with support dog Buddy.

Could you leave a legacy to Support Dogs?

A donation left in your will can make a lasting difference in so many ways



INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM

Left by:
Audrey Roberts
June 2020

SUPPORT FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY TO RETURN TO WORK

Left by:
G Longworth
9 March 2020

TRAINED DISABILITY ALERT DOG

Left by:
Monica O'Meara
January 2020

24/7 PERSONAL SUPPORT AND CARE

Left by:
E Longney
March 2019

1 in every 3 support dogs only exists thanks to the wonderful kindness of donations left to our charity in Wills.

For 30 years our charity has been transforming the lives of children and adults affected by autism, epilepsy and disability. If the time is ever right for you to remember a charity in your Will please remember Support Dogs.

Did you know that even a gift of 1% in your Will can make a huge difference, so those closest to you **receive 99%**.

Do you know that all you need is to give to your Will writer is our registered charity number **1088281**.

Make a will online for free with Support Dogs

Support Dogs have partnered with makeawillonline.co.uk to provide a free of charge will writing service to supporters.

This simple to use online service is available at www.makeawillonline.co.uk/supportdogs and is a simple online form to work through. Make-a-Will Online work with hundreds of different charities across the UK and have been operating for over 10 years.

The solicitors from Make-a-Will Online check every will for your peace of mind. When you make a will they tell us a gift exists. You can also choose to share your name so we can say "thank you".

Every gift, however large or small, makes a difference. Even just 1% of your will. There is further information about other will writing providers and also the information you need to give to your solicitor to leave a gift in your will at www.supportdogs.org.uk



Support Dogs' merchandise

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Yellow Puppy Labrador £2.00

BEST SELLER

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Christmas cards - pack of 8 (4 designs)	£2.00		
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Pug with red scarf decoration	£4.99		
Labrador with stocking decoration	£6.99		
Postage	£2.99	N/A	£2.99
Total:			

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Payment method Cash Cheque
(Please tick)

Please complete the form and return with cash or a cheque payable to Support Dogs to:

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21 Jessops Riverside, Brightside Lane
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Or order online here:
supportdogs.org.uk/shop

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You can see more dogs to sponsor at www.supportdogs.org.uk/sponsoradog



TINKERBELL

Breed: Lhasa Apso **Job:** Disability assistance
Home: London **Birthday:** 13th July



IGGY

Breed: Labrador Retriever cross **Job:** Autism assistance
Home: Yorkshire **Birthday:** 6th April



USHKA

Breed: Labrador **Job:** Seizure alert
Home: North Wales **Birthday:** 10th December



PUPPIES

Meet our heroes in training! These amazing pups are currently in their first stage of training to become a support dog.

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TINKERBELL IGGY USHKA PUPPIES

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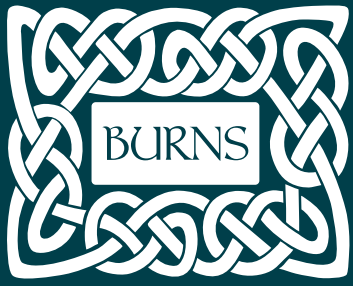
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