

Support Dogs' charity magazine

AURA

Autumn 2021 / Winter 2022

Edition 39

“Thunda has made the most incredible difference to Franklin’s life.”

Jo, mother of Franklin, autism assistance client

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Working through the retirement of a support dog
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Epilepsy seizure alert training
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MESSAGE FROM RITA...

Shining a light

We hope this magazine will be read as a shining light during these difficult times of the incredible life-changing wonders that are still possible. The stories in this issue are just a very small example of some of the vital work our small charity achieves, thanks entirely to our wonderful dogs, volunteers staff and of course our donors.

It feels hard to repeat just how difficult the past 18 months or so have been to our charity. The families we support live with some of the most challenging medical conditions and have been affected physically and mentally. The restrictions and limitations mean our work training more support dogs and helping more families has been made more difficult and achievements slower.

Fundraising in 2021 has been if anything more difficult than the previous year. Emergency funding streams available last year have ended, and for most part of this year we still have had to cancel much of our normal fundraising activity. Financial pressures are affecting our

donors more and competition for much larger charities with their expensive advertising campaigns has increased. Yet we still hear from so many families everyday still desperate for our help.

Despite these challenges our charity is proud of the lives we have saved and changed this year. This has been achieved thanks to your wonderful support and we ask you to please help us shine this light further and spread word of our work to a wider audience.

Rita Howson

Chief executive

News just in: Lucrezia to become a new patron of Support Dogs

We are proud to announce that ITV news presenter Lucrezia Millarini has agreed to become a patron of our charity.

The canine-loving broadcast journalist became first involved with the charity in 2020 when she presented at its annual graduation ceremony to celebrate the successful completion of training of its latest life-saving support dogs.

Lucrezia, who has her own pet Lhasa Apso called Milo, said she was in awe of the charity's life-changing work after meeting Lhasa Apso support dog Tinkerbelle.

Lucrezia said: "Support Dogs is a wonderful charity. It not only saves lives but transforms the independence and quality of life for the whole family. I am constantly amazed by what these dogs (of all shapes and sizes) are capable of! As the proud human of my own Lhasa, I had no idea this particular breed could even be an assistance dog. Until I met the tiny, but mighty, Tinkerbelle:



Lucrezia Millarini with Charli Colquhoun and support dogs Tinkerbelle and Burnsie

no ordinary pet, she received special training from Support Dogs and now provides essential help to her owner Charli. Whether it's opening doors or picking up dropped phones, Tinkerbelle is the perfect companion.

"The bond between Charli and Tinkerbelle is just one example of the many successful partnerships Support Dogs has helped forge between dog and human. And as we hopefully wave goodbye to the worst challenges of the pandemic, I hope to be involved in more exciting projects to raise awareness and much needed funding. Roll on 2022!"

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 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: David Hobson

Honorary President: Angela Rippon CBE

Patrons: The Earl & Countess of Scarborough
Elaine Paige OBE
Lucrezia Millarini

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To sponsor a dog today call Support Dogs on

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to donate visit

www.supportdogs.org.uk



Rupert - bringing more than just the bear necessities to Grainne

Grainne, who has MS, explains how her academic career helped make sense of her relationship with her two disability assistance dogs.

Clever Rupert the newly-qualified support dog can take a debit card out of a cash machine for owner Grainne O'Connor - but it's so much more than just a party trick.

Grainne has had MS for the past 20 years, and as her condition has progressed and deteriorated, she has lost the use of her hands - apart from one finger which she uses to key in her PIN number.

It took yellow Labrador Retriever cross Rupert just two days to learn how to perform the task, practising on the cash machine near Grainne's home in Kirby Stephen in Cumbria with Support Dogs' instructors.

Explains Grainne: *"I don't have much feeling in my hands anymore, but Rupert loves doing it for me. It sounds like a party trick but it's actually essential. If I have to take the card out and use it in a shop or a check out, chances are I'll drop it, so Rupert has also been taught to hand the card to the person on the till."*

Rupert's skill and dexterity are impressive, but it also illustrates a wider point about

Support Dogs and how it tailors the training of its dogs to suit the various and often changing needs of clients.

When Grainne got her first assistance dog, black Labrador Tori, who recently retired, her MS was less severe. Now Grainne's MS is having a greater impact on her mobility, Rupert's training has reflected that.

Grainne, now 53, was diagnosed with MS in her early 30s while working as a health professional, first as a midwife then a health visitor. In those days she got by using a stick; now she needs a mobility scooter to get around outside the house.

When she was made redundant ten years ago Grainne got Tori as a pet and applied to Support Dogs to have her trained as her disability assistance dog. Over an eight-year period the pair were a hugely successful partnership. Grainne has since become an academic, having recently completed an Open University PhD (more of which later) and says that without Tori she would never have been able to manage the workload and the travelling.

But as Tori got older, Grainne knew the time would come when she would have to contemplate starting over again with a new assistance dog.

"Tori had a menu of tasks when she was trained eight years ago," she says. "Obviously as my needs have changed, Support Dogs were very thorough in building up to Tori's retirement, and what they would need to add to Rupert's set of skills."

"The charity really understands the strength of the bond and the emotional trauma that's attached to retiring an assistance dog for the first time."

"We get an aftercare visit every year and when a dog is eight you have a discussion about working towards retirement. It is brought up in a very safe way to get people used to the idea that it's coming, and to give you two years to get ready for it. By the age of ten, dogs are considered senior, and they deserve their retirement and their reward for what they have given."

Adds Grainne: *"It was a huge change adapting to a new dog. It was a grieving process; you're losing a dog that you trust. Rupert could do all the things I needed him to, but I had to bond with another living thing, whereas Tori had been with me 24/7 for more than ten years."*

Tori had to be taught to be a pet dog again and to stop doing things around the house for Grainne. At first it was tough and confusing for her - both dogs would rush to the washing machine to unload it for example, or if Grainne dropped the remote Tori would want to pick it up. But gradually she stopped, trusting that Rupert would do it instead, and accepting that it was time to take a back seat.

Says Grainne: *"Both dogs get on OK now. She is eleven and he is three, so she sees him as an annoying little brother! It's now my responsibility to make sure that she gets*



Grainne and Rupert - the best of friends!





Grainne O'Connor and support dog Rupert

the best retirement any dog ever had."

Rupert and Grainne, like many of Support Dogs' recently qualified partnerships, had to contend with training during the pandemic, but since life has started to open up again, the pair have made enormous progress.

"He was brilliant emotionally for everyone in the family during lockdown (Grainne, and her husband Andrew have two grown-up children who came home during lockdown). If one of us was down he would know and put his head on their lap - he is very intuitive to people's feelings. He can be lively but when he has his jacket on, he does what he is supposed to do."

"Support dogs make the unbearable bearable. The dog doesn't get rid of a long-term disability or condition but makes it endurable in the best possible way."

With Grainne switching to a career in academia, it was perhaps no surprise that she chose a subject close to her heart for her PhD thesis: The lived experience of people with MS and their use of assistance dogs.

She says: *"When I was a midwife, I met someone with an assistance dog and asked them what difference it made. She told me: 'I would not be here now, I would not be alive if it weren't for her,' and I thought 'what the dog does is to take off her socks, so how can it make such a difference? Just buy a grabber so you can take off your own socks!' As a busy, capable, and independent woman with two young children I had little appreciation of the true benefits of having an*

assistance dog, but when you get one the sum of what it gives is huge in relation to the actual parts."

Grainne looked at the overall picture of living with a long-term condition, and the positive and negative effects of having a support dog with a finite lifespan.

She interviewed clients from two assistance dog charities including Support Dogs, looking at the lifespan of the partnership. What she found backed up her own experiences - that able bodied people become invisible when they become disabled, become visible again when they get a dog - but only when they are with the dog, which becomes the focus of attention. She also looked at how people with an assistance dog manage uncertainty and how they cope when they lose their dog, having to accept its much shorter lifespan, and the challenges of moving on to another animal.

"Support dogs make the unbearable bearable," says Grainne. "The dog doesn't get rid of a long-term disability or condition, but it makes it endurable in the best possible way. Dogs aren't for everyone, but for those people who love them it's extraordinary because they transform the whole dynamic of their interaction with society."

Grainne is hoping her studies will contribute to raising awareness of the research base about the importance of assistance dogs in the lives of people with disabilities and inform government social policy. *"Dogs aren't just nice and cute - there's a real research base that shows that dogs do improve people's lives," she says. "They DO make a difference."*

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



YOU can be amazing in 2022

Help us **train more dogs** and change the lives of those affected by autism, epilepsy and disability.

Challenges for you!

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

Monsal Dale Bridge Abseil 7th May 2022

Peak District, Derbyshire

Could you take on 25 metre abseil launching yourself from an old railway bridge into a narrow gorge for Support Dogs?



Fundraising target: £50

Great North Run 11th September 2022

South Shields

Join us on the famous 13.1 mile run from Newcastle's city centre to the coast in South Shields. The perfect event for first timers and seasoned runners.



Fundraising target: £350

London Marathon 2nd October 2022

London

We have 9 places available in the event everyone wants to do once in their life time! Join us for the world's best marathon is the world's best atmosphere.



Fundraising target: £2000



OTHER WAYS TO FUNDRAISE



Clever Paws Quiz

Ever wanted to be a quiz master or think of yourself as a 'mastermind'? We've got the questions (and answers) you just need to get your friends, family and colleagues together!



The Great British Bark Off

If you love baking, or just eating cake, then this is the fundraiser for you! We have everything you need to get started including recipes, and hints and tips for how to run your event so all you need to do is get baking!



In Your School

A four-legged race, a woof-ty dress up day or a dog themed cake sale, we'd love to support your school fundraising and visit you with one of our dogs in person or virtually!



We can help you plan your own epic event and have everything you need to get started. Get in touch with us on fundraising@supportdogs.org.uk or 0114 2617800.

A BIG THANK YOU

to all you fantastic fundraisers

We are continually delighted by people who choose to fundraise for us. Many people are still completing challenges they planned for 2020 and many continue to think of inventive ways to raise funds. As always there are so many more people we wish to thank than here is room on the page.

The brilliant **Tracey and Melissa** who conquered the Colour Obstacle Rush to **raise £295.**

Rohan Hyett and Rod Howe who took to the skies **raising £1,385** by completing a skydive.

Emma, Mike and Kerry who walked the 109 miles of the Cleveland Way in five days **raising a whopping £6,102.**

Green-fingered **Keira-Mai** aged eight, who **raised £212.10** by growing and selling plants.

The 23 runners who completed 26.2 miles as part of the London Marathon and Virtual London Marathon **raising over £23,000 - incredible!**

Ben Taylor who ran his way to **£700 in sponsorship** by completing the Manchester 10km.

Vanessa Mayo who conquered the Chiltern Challenge **raising a marvellous £545.**

Amy Clay and Matthew Gascoyne who

generously asked for donations to Support Dogs rather than gifts at their wedding **raising a fantastic £685.50!**

Andrea Bryson who braved a wing walk **raising a hair-raising £750.**

The 22 runners who completed the Great North Run **raising over £9,000** for our work. Fantastic!

Patrick Devlin who **raised £540** in sponsorship by walking 50km over the Brecon Beacons.

Peak Forest Primary School, Great Hucklow Primary School and Stoney Middleton Primary School who organised a Dress as a Dog Day **raising £112.**

Everyone who donated in **memory of Elsie Marriot.**

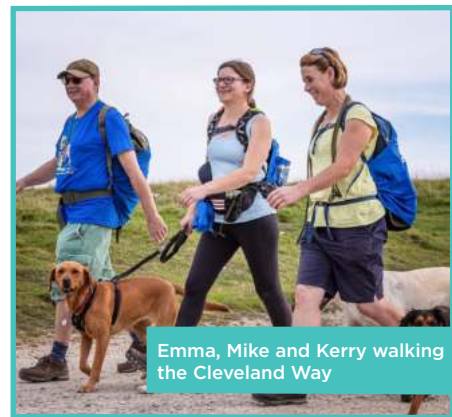
Miss Radford, a passionate dog lover, who made a **bequest of £500** to Support Dogs in her Will.

Shadan Moradi who **raised £45.90** by making and selling beautiful cards of our dogs.

Poppy Harris aged eight who chose to **donate £10** to our work.



Keira-Mai and her plant stall



Emma, Mike and Kerry walking the Cleveland Way

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

Support us in your celebrations!



A doggy birthday in aid of Support Dogs

Whether you are organising a **wedding, birthday or a special anniversary**, your generosity can help raise some extra funds to make the lives of others better. From your dog's birthday to your wedding day, we can provide you the ideas and items you need to raise funds on your special day.

- **Table cards** showing your support to the charity, a great alternative to individual wedding favours.
- **Pin badges** an ideal party and wedding favour.
- **Support Dogs' bunting and balloons** to decorate.
- **Collection boxes or envelopes** for people to donate on the day.
- **Our puppy party pack**, because everyone deserves a birthday party!

We are on hand to help find and choose a challenge to suit you. Get in touch with us on fundraising@supportdogs.org.uk or **0114 2617800.**



The lightning effects of a dog called Thunda

Thanks to his autism assistance dog Thunda, seven-year-old Franklin and his family's lives have been greatly improved. And now other families with children with autism can follow his mum's inspirational Instagram blog documenting their moving story.

Diagnosed with autism at the age of two, and later with learning difficulties and sensory processing disorder, Franklin Jordan's story follows a trajectory that will be all too familiar to the parents of children with the condition.

As a toddler, Franklin struggled with eye contact and communication and didn't respond to his name. He regularly "stimmed" by spinning in circles, flapping his arms and jumping up and down. After the shock of the diagnosis, and the worry of what the future might hold for their son, parents Jo and Steve got on with the practicalities of giving Franklin the best life possible. That's when Jo started her blog, *Spinning in Circles*.

She says: "I started the blog when he was young. We had no idea what to expect. I wanted to show other people the experience we have had with Franklin, to raise awareness, and give parents a bit of comfort to show that they are not the only ones going through it."

Franklin started at mainstream school but after two years was moved to a specialist autism school near the Jordan's home in Bolton. With a class size of just seven, a teacher and four teaching assistants, Franklin started getting the support he needed and has begun to thrive.

However, his biggest problem was leaving the house. "Going out and about, going into shops, going to new places, has always been really difficult for Franklin," says Jo. "There would be months when we couldn't get him into the car or out of the house; it was awful. He'd have the most terrible meltdowns in shops. A lot of it was frustration - he gets overwhelmed. He's very sensitive and has to wear ear defenders as he can't cope if his surroundings are too bright or too busy."



Out and about: Franklin with mum Jo and autism assistance dog Thunda

It was at that point Jo and Steve looked around for some four-legged support and found it with Support Dogs.

"We read about the charity in a magazine," says Jo. "We'd never had a dog as a family, so were not sure how Franklin would react to it. We were accepted onto the programme, and although we had to wait a while due to

lockdown, when they were matched, Franklin instantly bonded with Thunda; they seemed so comfortable together."

Training was intense but thorough, with Jo as Thunda's main handler, and the partnership qualified in September, lightening the load on Jo, and giving them more time to be a family. The Jordans' also have a ten-year-old



“ He has made the most incredible difference to Franklin’s life ”



daughter, Tabitha.

Jo explains Thunda's impact: *“Before Thunda, at times we could never do things like going to the supermarket. Franklin could not cope with that. We could not get him out of the door. Now, thanks to the magic of Thunda he will go for walks, happily tethered to the dog. A simple trip to the supermarket is run of the mill for most people but it’s amazing for us - we are starting small but hoping to build on this!”*

Although boy and dog are a great partnership, they are not joined at the hip in the house. *“Thunda is so laid back*

and chilled, and he loves to snuggle up with us on the sofa,” says Jo. *“But as soon as Franklin makes a noise or gets upset or cries, Thunda always seems to know where he is and will go straight over to him.*

“When we go out Franklin needs Thunda. Even when Thunda is off lead having some free time he will look back to see Franklin, to check up on him.

“We always used to be anxious when we went out. The whole time we were out we were waiting for him to become overwhelmed, so it was never enjoyable. It’s so different now, and I don’t think

there could be a better dog for us.

“Thunda has become a huge part of our family over the last 12 months and is now a fully-fledged member of it. He has made the most incredible difference to Franklin’s life but also to Tabitha’s, mine and Steve’s and we couldn’t imagine life without him. He is the sweetest, gentlest, cuddliest dog with a tinge of bonkers thrown in when he’s playing out. When Support Dogs said they had found a perfect match for Franklin, they weren’t kidding! The bond they have made so quickly is remarkable.”

Excerpts from Jo Jordan's 'Spinning in Circles' Instagram blog



October 2020



Covid has presented **so many difficult challenges for Franklin** and our family. Consistency and routine which he relies on so heavily have been completely thrown up in the air, with him having no understanding of why, **resulting in his anxiety levels being constantly sky high**. There has never been a time when he has needed stability and security more.

Thunda will provide this in abundance, and we cannot wait for him to join our family. We're excited and very hopeful that this partnership is going to change Franklin's life (and our lives) forever.

November 2020



We just managed a **45-minute walk around a garden centre!** I know it's only a garden centre but it's our first Christmas activity as a family where Franklin isn't upset, screaming, having to be carried or in a buggy. He walked around happily and **coped amazingly with all the lights, sounds, smells**, even a singing reindeer! Amazing!!!

Christmas 2020



We'd been to the Christmas light display at Dunham Massey a few years ago. Franklin wouldn't walk so we sped around with him in the buggy while managing a lot of tears and meltdowns as he struggled to take it all in.

That was before Thunda.

Given how well Franklin has been coping since being tethered to Thunda, we decided to ramp things up to 11 and try another visit!

I can't believe how well it went. **Franklin and Thunda walked around the whole of the light show.** We stopped for food. We paused to admire the light displays. We enjoyed and danced to the music. We all had an amazing time - like every other family there!

The walk was just over an hour, probably a mile long. In the dark. At night. With lots of flashing lights, sounds, smells and bustling with people, even with social distancing.

For the first time ever, I think we didn't just "get through it" as is often our aim. Franklin didn't just cope, he actually enjoyed it as much as Tabitha!

This is the best Christmas present we could ever have asked for.

Early 2021



Thunda doesn't see autism or difference, he just sees a little boy who needs his **love and comfort more than most**. He is the best therapist.

June 2021



Who would have thought it?! This time last year I wrote a post celebrating Franklin's first walk out of the front door without a major meltdown. It was a short 50 metre walk to the post box and back but was a huge achievement for him at that time.

This weekend he managed to walk, run, play and climb a tree for a full hour! What a difference a year makes.

July 2021



We did a lovely 'stay' in Tesco while I packed away the shopping.

The fact that **Franklin can cope calmly with this type of outing now**, compared to 12 months ago, is incredible and is testament to Thunda.



Follow Jo's Instagram blog

@spinning_in_circles



Seizure alert training

How Cobble's strengths will help him as epilepsy seizure alert dog

Instructor Kate Breen explains how she trains future seizure alert dog Cobble.

"After our dogs have been through their early more generalised training, I take dogs through their final stages of training and work directly with clients to ensure that they have a successful partnership," she explains.

"Cobble will be a seizure alert dog - a real life saver, giving a 100 per cent reliable alert in advance of an epileptic seizure.

"He will also go on to learn different tasks - fetching medication, fetching a blanket to keep his client warm after a seizure, or fetching help.

"Every support dog is different, and they are matched to their programme according to their skills, their strengths and personality traits.

"Cobble was chosen for seizure alert because he excelled in three key areas:

His ability to make connections

"This is important because we are training dogs to interpret changes that lead to epileptic seizure. The dog is able to pick up emotional or behavioural changes in a person whereby they will make an association with an outcome which we reinforce and reward.

His excellent focus and concentration

"It takes a lot for the dogs to take in the changes in a person before an epileptic seizure. They also need to maintain that focus no matter what environment they are in - to ignore other sounds, other dogs, or other people that might be making a fuss of them, and to focus on their handler.



His ability to bond with people

"We look for a dog's willingness or its need to be with their seizure alert client wherever they go, as they will be working with them 24/7 until the age of ten.



"The dogs must be people-focussed and in tune with the handler as the client can have a seizure anywhere - in a shop, restaurant, cinema. Dogs like Cobble will give a 100 per cent reliable warning to exact minute before an epileptic seizure."

Good luck Cobble!

"Cobble will be a seizure alert dog - a real life saver, giving a 100 per cent reliable alert in advance of an epileptic seizure."

Seizure alert dogs - making a difference

The financial difference to the NHS a support dog makes

Support Dogs has partnered with Canon Medical Systems Europe and the University of Exeter to start a preliminary study to examine the potential costs savings to the NHS of Support Dogs' epilepsy seizure alert programme.

Work began this year with a short initial study, in which students from the university carried out qualitative and quantitative research. They assessed the use of NHS services by those with epilepsy who do not have a seizure alert dog (and their families) and compared this usage to that of those with a seizure alert dog trained by the charity.

This looked at direct costs on services such as A&E, primary care, hospital, pharmaceutical and community care, indirect costs such

mental health services, and non-medical cost such as transport.

Danny Anderson, fundraising manager at Support Dogs said: "We are delighted that Canon Medical Systems and the University of Exeter have been able to support us in beginning this vital research. It will help in understanding the significant impact our charity makes to the NHS and public spending, as well as, of course, to the lives of the families and individuals we help.

"Our charity currently only has the resources to help less than 1 in every 50 people who contact us. Research like this is so vital for us to quantify the significant and effective impact our work has. This, alongside the incredible need and demand for our services, we hope

will highlight to future funders the difference donations of any size can make."

Through the research we heard individuals tell of the amazing difference the dogs had made to their lives, and how their previous reliance on NHS services reduced, as a result of having a reliable alert provided by their dog. We also spoke with individuals.

Those interviewed who are still waiting for a support dog explained the falls and injuries sustained as a result of their seizures and the resulting treatment for injuries including burns, cuts, bruises and abrasions. The mental, physical and social impact on both parents and children of those with epilepsy was also highlighted.

The results of the preliminary study will be published next year.



Georgie is the best for Kevan

Life looked bleak for Kevan after a massive stroke drastically changed his life. But that was before the arrival of super-dog Georgie...



Kevan and wife Jan and Georgie

When Kevan Farrell had a stroke almost six years ago at the age of 57, his life changed dramatically.

Kevan, who previously travelled the world for his job designing computer systems was left completely paralysed down one side of his body, without 50 per cent of his sight, and with significantly impaired speech.

For weeks, Kevan hovered between life and death, but after weeks in intensive care, months of rehabilitation and with the support of his partner Jan and four grown-up children, Kevan fought to survive.

"We didn't know if he would live or die, or if he would be able to speak again, but slowly he came back," says Jan, a former landscape architect, who gave up her job to care for Kevan.

The couple have since married, but Kevan, now 63, was keen to find a source of support which took some of the caring responsibility off Jan's shoulders. And they decided that the support should be four-legged.

They applied to a couple of assistance dog charities but were told that Kevan's

disability was too severe for a dog to be trained for him. Determined to find a solution, they set about getting their own pet dog – an 18-month-old gundog-trained yellow Labrador called Georgie, that they hoped they could train to help them. As they began socialising Georgie, they then learned about the charity Support Dogs.

According to life-long Manchester United fan Kevan, she is called Georgie, after Georgie Best, because she is the best! Certainly, Support Dogs' instructor Hollie Morrall agrees, saying she is the



smartest dog she has ever met. Georgie was readily accepted on to the charity's disability assistance programme and took to training brilliantly, with the pair qualifying as a partnership in September this year. She has learned an extraordinary number of tasks to provide vital daily help for Kevan.

Georgie helps with so much, including dressing, undressing, picking up and fetching items, opening and closing doors, pulling Kevan's legs on and off the footplates on his electric wheelchair, and moving the footplates up and down as Kevan needs them. It is all these relatively small, regular tasks that allows Kevan to be that bit more independent.

Because Kevan's speech is severely limited, Jan had to first learn the commands for Georgie, and slowly Kevan did the same. Initially Georgie was taught sign language with Kevan giving her visual signals, but it was a struggle for Kevan - if not for Georgie! And as his speech improved, he became able to give the dog brief commands like: 'Settle, come, pick up, remote, nudge.'

"She helps around the house but the biggest difference she makes is to Kevan's speech and personal happiness"

"And even if he gives the wrong command she will understand; she is a very intuitive dog," adds Jan.

Says Kevan: "Support Dogs have been brilliant and made the seemingly impossible, achievable. They did a fantastic job; they support us and are always ready to give expert advice when we need it. Having instructor Tracey on the end of the phone during lockdown encouraged us to keep going and she helped us learn new tasks via remote training, like getting Georgie to nudge up the wheelchair plate and pull my leg out of the way."

"I really enjoy our walks together, the companionship she brings and she's so

much fun to have around. It gives me so much pleasure when we work together; I like learning the commands and the responsibility of looking after her. She loves to join in everything, and she makes me more independent."

Says Jan: "With Support Dogs you get special people who know about dogs and what to do, and they were prepared to work with me and Kevan, which the other charities - who have a much more rigid approach - hadn't been prepared to do. They work to the client's individual needs and requirements - and made the training specific to us."

The couple now live in Northwich in Cheshire in a house in that is adapted for downstairs living. Kevan still needs and always will need the support of a team of carers but thanks to Jan and to Georgie, he copes well and stoically with his altered state, and his life is worth living.

Kevin says: "Initially, it was very difficult, but I've accepted my new life, which to me infinitely better than the alternative - ie no life. My relationship with Georgie is very important. She's central to our lives now, and I can't imagine her not being around."

For Jan, the difference Georgie has made both to her and to Kevan's life is huge.

"She helps around the house but the biggest difference she makes is to Kevan's speech and personal happiness," she says. *"They interact with each other, and that's massive. It's not just picking things up. She makes a difference to his wellbeing. It's like having a new dimension to his life. That partnership between them has grown, and Support Dogs has accelerated all that."*

Find out more about our disability assistance programme at www.supportdogs.org.uk



Tracey with trainee support dog Arthur

Tracey's training dogs to change lives

Support Dogs' senior instructor Tracey Moore talks about the job she loves.

For almost 15 years Tracey Moore has played a huge part in developing life-changing relationships between children and their canine carers.

Tracey joined the charity in 2007 initially as a volunteer, then a trainer, and an instructor. For the past three years has been a senior instructor, largely responsible for training Support Dogs' successful autism assistance partnerships, although she has also trained dogs for the seizure alert programme for adults with epilepsy.

"Children with autism who are often unable to communicate or express their feelings in a way that is understood by others, have little sense of danger or of the consequences of their actions," she says.

"Our dogs are trained to provide safety for the child outside the home, reduce stress in social environments and provide invaluable independence and companionship. For so many of our youngsters their dog is their best friend.

"Our trainers carry out the basic training of our dogs, and once they have completed the socialising and more general levels of assistance dog training - and once the child has been successfully matched to a particular dog - I start on the intensive training specific for this programme, working at the centre with the dog's handler, who is usually the mum or dad of the child with autism.

"They will only have met the dog once or twice when it was matched with their

child, so we start from scratch, doing some bonding work - so play sessions, basic obedience, some task work, taking them out for free runs, and getting the dogs to interact with them.

"We build up gently so then start taking the dogs into restricted areas such as supermarkets or retail parks, and by the end of the couple of weeks we spend together we go to swimming pools, play centres and cinemas. It's all about building up the handler's confidence and knowing that the dog will be OK in these places. It's very full on!

"Once the dog has gone home to live with its new family, I give them a little time to settle in, then make several visits to their home (all our clients have to live within

a two-hour drive of our training centre.) I need to make sure that mum or dad is handling well, and that the child is happy being attached to the dog's jacket when they go out - this is to prevent them bolting and running into the road. Safety outside the home is paramount so training a dog to 'brace' - basically anchoring itself to the pavement and won't let the child run off - is really important.

“It’s so rewarding, seeing the difference the dogs make to the lives of children with autism; it never loses its thrill.”

“For six months the handler, the child and the dog practise going into restricted areas and gaining in confidence. I’ll make around three visits during this time, more if needed, but problems are quite rare at this stage and usually they are just teething problems that I can sort out on the phone. “Clients have to complete training diaries and submit them to us on a monthly basis, so I will check them and if there’s anything that needs attention I’ll go and visit. There are lots of checks and balances and opportunities to smooth out any issues.

“After six months we carry out a final assessment and if all goes well the child and the dog will qualify as an official autism assistance partnership. This relationship will last until the dog is ten, when it officially retires, although most families keep the dog on as a pet after retirement.

“Clients still have to complete a progress report for six months to make sure everything’s OK. They are then handed over to my colleagues in client services. “Officially that’s the end of my contact with them, but I often follow their Facebook pages and sometimes see them when they come into the centre. I always have a soft spot for those families I’ve worked with, and it’s nice to keep tabs and see how they are getting on.

“The best thing...is accepting parents onto our autism programme. It is a really lovely thing because you know it will make such a difference to their lives. I love working

with kids and seeing them interact with the dogs. You can just see the difference in them - it gets you!

“The worst thing...is when you have to tell a client that they have not been successful perhaps because there is no interaction between the child and the dog or if the child is fearful of the dog. Happily, this rarely happens!

“It’s so rewarding, seeing the difference the dogs make to the lives of children with

autism; it never loses its thrill. Our dogs are so clever, and it never fails to blow me away what they can achieve. I think it’s just brilliant that they are able to do such amazing things. I feel very lucky doing what I do.”

For more information on our autism assistance programme go to www.supportdogs.org.uk



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June 2021

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Breed: Dalmation **Job:** Disability assistance
Home: Nottingham **Birthday:** 1st November



SIMBA

Breed: Yellow Labrador **Job:** Seizure alert
Home: Cheshire **Birthday:** 5th August



STANLEY

Breed: Labrador **Job:** Seizure alert
Home: Gloucester **Birthday:** 3rd April



TINKERBELL

Breed: Lhasa Apso **Job:** Disability assistance
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Breed: Labrador **Job:** Autism assistance
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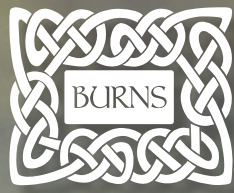
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