

Support Dogs' charity magazine

Aura

Spring / Summer 2022

Edition 40

“When Stanley is with Dawnay, we know he is safe. Thank you Support Dogs.”

Gemma, mother of Stanley,
autism assistance client

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

How support dog Mater has given Freya, who has muscular dystrophy, the confidence to realise her dreams.

See page 4

Puppy Alex is keeping the memory alive of a young man called Alex.

Find out more on page 14

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YEARS
OF SUPPORT DOGS

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MESSAGE FROM RITA...

Simple solutions in a difficult world

In a world full of complex problems, the significant yet everyday challenges faced by families such as those featured in this magazine are easily overlooked.

Epilepsy currently affects over half a million people in the UK, the most common neurological condition. There are over 11 million people registered disabled and more than 700,000 people with a confirmed diagnosis of autism. The difficulties faced by families living with these conditions can be overwhelming, complicated and too often understated.

Our charity provides a very direct and, in some ways, simple solution. We train and provide specially-trained dogs to bring 24/7 life-saving care and support. We provide this entirely free of charge. It is paid for completely through the kindness of those who donate or fundraise for our charity.

The hugely positive impact of our charity is also very tangible. Simply speak with those who have benefited from our work, and you will learn of the difference it has made to them and their families. In our most recent survey of clients 100% responded that they feel safer with their support dog, that their support dog has significantly reduced their care needs and increased their confidence to independently care for themselves. In the

survey clients spoke about the impact the dog had on their lives, enabling them to be more physically and socially active, often allowing them to return to work or volunteer in their community.

This year we celebrate the 30th year of our charity providing these vital services. While the world has changed significantly during this time, the challenges facing families living with the conditions our families support hasn't. The number of individuals and families contacting us for support each year is as great as ever.

We hope this magazine will highlight the extraordinary impact that our support dogs make. These stories are just a very small example of some of the vital, life-changing work that our small charity achieves. Thanks entirely to our wonderful dogs, volunteers, staff and donors.

Rita Howson

Chief executive

Karting ace Alisha made an ambassador Support Dogs

Teenage sporting sensation Alisha Palmowski has been made an ambassador for Support Dogs.

Fifteen-year-old Alisha, who recently became only the second-ever female to win UK junior motorsport's biggest, most prestigious prize, is a massive dog lover.

Chequered Flag Motorsport, the charitable arm of UK motorsport, has made Alisha an ambassador for Support Dogs - something the canine-crazy teenager is very happy about.

"When I found out I'd been made an ambassador for Support Dogs, I was over the moon - it's a perfect match for me," says Alisha, who has a pet dog, a Shih Tzu called Pip.

"I love dogs. I was given Pip on my sixth birthday. He's not the brightest though and



could never be able to do all the amazing things that support dogs can do!"

Alisha has a great future ahead of her as a leading young racing driver, but she is also keen to ensure Support Dogs gets equal polling as she acts as an ambassador for the charity through the talks she gives to schools and inspiring young people, but also through a range of fundraising activity she is planning, including a sponsored skydive for her 16th birthday later this year.

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.

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Chair: David Hobson

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Support dog Mater gives Freya a sporting chance

Support dog Mater has given Freya, who has muscular dystrophy, the confidence to realise her dreams as a top UK wheelchair athlete.



Freya and Mater: a winning combination.

When Freya Levy started to develop symptoms of the hereditary muscle-wasting condition muscular dystrophy, she thought it was the end of her promising sporting career.

Instead, the plucky teenager switched to wheelchair events, playing first basketball then later rugby league, rugby 7's and para-ice-hockey.

But it was only when she had her pet dog Mater trained as her disability assistance dog by Support Dogs that she had the confidence to aim even higher – and now Freya's goal is to represent Great Britain in the 2024 Paralympics in wheelchair basketball.

Muscular dystrophy is a progressive condition that in Freya's case affects the muscles in her shoulders particularly severely, leaving her unable to raise her arms above her head. She can't walk or stand and gets around in a wheelchair.

Despite her disability, Freya attended Worcester University (which just happened to be where the GB wheelchair basketball team was based) and did a degree in

sports coaching and PE.

In 2018 Freya and partner Katie got 12-week-old fox-red Labrador Mater as a pet. Says Freya: "I was in the park trying to pick up his ball and couldn't, and after that every time he brought the tennis ball back to me and put it on my lap. It was adorable - and very helpful! I'd looked into assistance dogs in the past but never thought it was something you train your pet for. But that changed my mind."

When Mater was ten months old Freya applied to Support Dogs' disability programme and the pair started their training just as lockdown started to ease when Mater was 18 months old.

"The experience was life-changing, a real game-changer," says Freya. "I was shielding during the pandemic and Mater started training just as things were opening up again which was a bit daunting. It was the first time going into shops for both of us, so it was really lovely to do that together. He struggled with his confidence - like his owner - so we crossed that bridge together."

Freya and Mater qualified as a disability assistance partnership in October last year, and their bond is already unbreakable.

She says: "When I was diagnosed, losing sport was really tough, and disabled sport filled that hole. I wanted to have children and be a mum and Mater filled that void for me. The bond between us is very, very close. He is my little boy!"

His practical skills are essential too. "He picks things up when I drop them on the floor, and helps me take my jumper and socks off, brings my shoes, and his bowl. They sound like little things, but they make a big difference.

"His other tasks are to bring my wheelchair when it rolls too far away when I'm in my sports chair or on the sofa, and he can fetch help or go for my partner if I were to fall at home.

She adds: "Mater walks alongside my wheelchair attached by a lead, which means I can control my chair. Now I can take him out on my own, which I had never done before, and it's given me freedom to do things without stress or panic."



Freya has played wheelchair basketball since the age of 14, but her sporting career is now taking off in a big way – she signed her first professional contract in wheelchair basketball in October.

She has represented her country in wheelchair rugby 7's, basketball and ice-hockey and is hoping to add rugby league to that list next year.

"Sport is the main focus of my life," she says. "I train five days a week and have games at the weekend. I've got lots of goals for the next 12 months – there are lots of World Cups and World Championships set for 2022 – plus the Commonwealth Games. It's going to be a big year. But my dream goal is to get to the Paralympic Games in 2024.

"I am fully aware that I can't pause my MSD, and I'm doing as much as possible while I can. I don't say no to an opportunity – my diary is horrendous. But of course I absolutely love it and wouldn't change it for the world!"

Freya, who works for a charity that brings competitive sport into schools for children with disabilities and special educational needs, credits Mater with making her less reliant on her partner Katie. "I'd have to wait for her to come home as I'd be struggling to get my jumper on, for example, which doesn't sound much but can be a big deal..."

But primarily, it's all about confidence.

"We get confidence from being together," she says. "I understand him in a completely different way to when he was a pet dog and that is entirely down to Support Dogs. It's hard to put into words what I feel about Support Dogs – they have been a life-changer for me and Mater. I love sport and I play sport a lot but sometimes I hide behind it – I use it as a shield. Mater has helped me to come out of my shell."

"I wanted to have children and be a mum and Mater filled that void for me. The bond between us is very, very close. He is my little boy!"

"He has given me confidence and independence. He gives me a lot of hope for the future. Muscular dystrophy is a progressive condition, but it's not daunting as long as I've got Mater."



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

YOU can be AMAZING in 2022!

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: fundraising@supportdogs.org.uk or 0114 2617800

Monsal Dale Bridge Abseil Saturday 7th May

Daredevil or up for a challenge, take part in our abseil from Millers Dale Bridge in the Peak District. You'll be lowering yourself from an old railway bridge into a narrow gorge, hanging over the arch of the bridge with 20 metres free hanging - the ultimate experience.



Fundraising target: **£50**

Great North Run Sunday 11th September

Back to the original course, this world-famous half marathon with world-famous support takes you from Newcastle city centre to the coast at South Shields. A wonderful experience for first timers and experienced runners alike.



Fundraising target: **£325**

Virtual London Marathon Sunday 2nd October

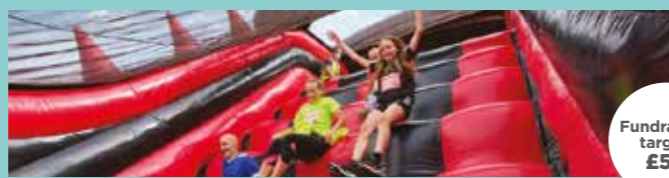
The virtual London Marathon is back, and we have 25 places! You have 24 hours to complete the distance, running or walking, with as many rest stops as you like, all from your home. You'll receive an official London Marathon finishers t-shirt and medal to celebrate your success!



Fundraising target: **£250**

Inflatable 5km Challenge Throughout the year

The world's largest and best inflatable 5K got even Bigger, Bouncier and Better! With 32 gigantic obstacles on the 5K distance combined with five pumping music zones to motivate you around the course this is a fun event for all the family with anyone aged five years old and upwards able to take part. Events across the country in Kent, Bristol, York, Glasgow, Ipswich, Leeds, Goodwood, St Albans, Bournemouth, Stafford and Peterborough, from May to December.



Fundraising target: **£50**

MICRO-VOLUNTEERING

Micro-volunteering is a fantastic (and easy!) way to make a big difference to Support Dogs with a little time commitment from you! Five minutes, one hour, or one day a month is all time well spent to support our work. Here are just some ideas:



Look after a collection tin

Could you place and look after a collection tin in your local area? A visit every three to six months is all it needs and you will not only raise vital funds for our work but it will also help increase the profile of Support Dogs far and wide.



Make toys for our dogs

When a new puppy or dog in training joins Support Dogs, we love to give them a whole load of goodies so that they can settle into their puppy socialisers' or foster carers' homes, learn, relax and importantly play! Could you make snuffle mats or pull-toys so that each of our pups has something new of their own?



Recycle your old stuff

Did you know you can donate and recycle a whole host of items for Support Dogs? Stamps, jewellery, watches, broken and damaged items (like odd earrings, or snapped chains) can all raise much-needed funds for our work.

A BIG THANK YOU for your fantastic fundraising

We are continually delighted by people who choose to fundraise for us in such fantastic and inventive ways. As always there are so many more people we wish to thank than there is room on the page.

Lottie Langham who chose to raise money for our work during her Bat Mitzvah year, and put in lots of early morning training runs to complete a 10km raising a brilliant **raising a £1,656**.

Rotary Club of Wakefield Chantry who chose us as their charity of the year **donating a wonderful £2,000**.

Captain of Corhampton Golf Club, **Ray Hartley** and all the members at the club who **raised over £9,000** for us as their charity of the year. Tee-rific!

Pound Hill Junior School who **raised £575** for our work from their special secret shop.

Thurstonland Community Choir who sung their way to **£600** at a Christmas carol concert.

University of Sheffield Boxing Club who hopped and jumped their way to a **fabulous £300** during their skipathon.

Eight-year-old **Nelson Cresswell-Lane** who held a cake sale at school making a **scrumptious £22!**

The team at **Nationwide Building Society Sheffield** who have been selling Doggy Valentine's Day bandanas, **raising a lovely £60**.

Trish, David and Emma Suckling who made a donation in celebration of Alison Leech's 60th Birthday.

Scarborough and District All Breeds Dog Training Club who **donated £126** following a raffle at their AGM.

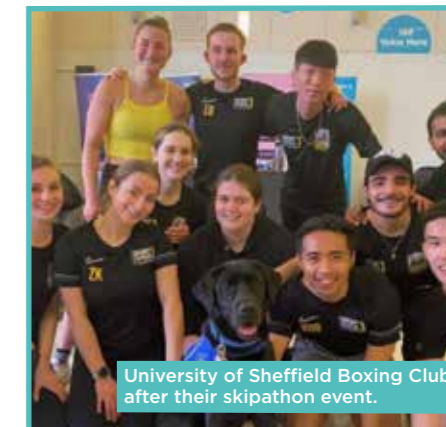
Vanessa Strobel who celebrated her birthday by **raising £65** through a Facebook fundraiser.

The **120 people and 80 dogs** who joined us for festive fun at our Santa Paws Walk in December **raising over £2,500**.

The **members of Doric Lodge** in Grantham who donated a **wonderful £500** for our work in their area.



Disability client Sarah Henson receives a cheque from the Doric Lodge Masons.



University of Sheffield Boxing Club after their skipathon event.

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

Businesses building life-changing partnerships



We've had a very exciting start to the year for corporate partnerships with many companies choosing us as their charity of the year.

Sky Betting & Gaming have committed to raising a minimum of £100,000 for us over the course of 2022. They kicked things off with a very well-attended pub quiz (Support

Dogs' Chris Daykin and SBG's Lucy Brown pictured above) and have many other events lined up including a casino night, the Three Peaks Challenge, a cycling sportive and a charity ball which will see 800 guests in attendance.

Support Dogs' corporate partnerships manager, Chris Daykin said: "This is the

biggest corporate partnership we've had in our 30-year history, and it will make a huge impact for us as we try to grow our charity. We're really looking forward to all the activities they have planned for the year ahead and doing our bit to help make the final total raised as high as possible."

This level of support is rare, and we are reliant on the wonderful support of that businesses big and small are able to provide. From our Dog and Doughnuts offices visits to sporty challenges, fundraising dinners and product fundraising promotions there are many ways that businesses can get involved. A great way to engage staff and customers while doing something amazing. Some businesses go on to even raise enough to name a support dog puppy such as Frank named by Five Wealth Management and Conan named by Canon Medical Systems.



We are charity that takes a flexible approach and would love to hear from you. If your business would like to support us in building life-changing partnerships, please contact **chris.daykin@supportdogs.org.uk** or phone **0114 261 7800**.

Gentle Dawnay is keeping Stanley safe

How the laid-back Labrador is having a calming effect on the high-energy youngster with autism.

For our autism partnerships, life is inevitably divided into before and after the arrival of their canine hero.

For the Nutton family from Barnsley in South Yorkshire that contrast is particularly life changing.

Mum Gemma describes her five-year-old son Stanley as: "Like 5,000 Duracell batteries on all the time. He's at energy level 1 million!" To stress the point, she adds: "If there was a cliff, he'd run off it."

Stanley, like many youngsters with autism, has absolutely no sense of danger and used to terrify his family by bolting and running onto the road. He used to wear an 'adventure belt' around his waist which was attached to his mum's waist or use a special needs buggy to keep him safe.

But since the family welcomed Dawnay the laid-back Labrador into their home, trips outside the home are no longer fraught with danger.

One of the main reasons that Support Dogs trains autism assistance dogs is to keep the child safe. The child holds onto a handle on their dog's harness and the animal is trained to 'brace' when the child tries to run into the road.

"Stanley is a really bad bolter, he is terrible near roads and his concentration is not very good," explains Gemma.

"When we started training with Dawnay we discussed if he had the capacity to hold on to her handle. Now he holds onto it even when he's not supposed to and will stop at the kerb with Dawnay. He will even say: 'Kerb.'

"Whereas before he used to run off all the time. When he's with her he manages to concentrate, hold the handle and stop by the roadside. When he is attached to Dawnay she is brilliant with her brace, and we know he is safe."

When Stanley was born it was obvious very early on that there was something different about him with dad Alan



Stanley and Eva having fun in the snow with Dawnay.

spotting a number of red flags, although Gemma was dismissive of this until he was diagnosed at the age of two.

Stanley didn't walk until he was two and is still very unbalanced. He gets distracted easily and doesn't really speak beyond the odd word or phrase, although he likes to shout and scream when he goes into shops and cafes.

Gemma and Alan started Googling to see what help was on offer and found Support Dogs. "Everything seemed a bit glum," says Gemma.

"When our little boy was diagnosed with autism, it was like a grieving process. We had to accept that his future could look different to the typical life you have mapped out in your head when you have a child; we had to jump into his world and see everything differently."

Their application to Support Dogs was successful, and eventually Stanley was matched with the beautiful pale-yellow Lab, who has proceeded to keep him safe, calm him down - and just as importantly, make him laugh.



Support Dogs' senior instructor Tracey Moore with Stanley and Dawnay.

Photo/s courtesy of @josie_h_photography

"Dawnay is really clever, she knows when to not bother him, and when to bother him. She starts licking his face when he gets upset and he forgets that he is upset and wags her tail when she picks him up from school," says Gemma. "Stanley is completely comfortable with her now. He will feed her and throw her a ball, which is a big thing for him to do because he stims (wafts his arms around).

"The other month he got Covid and he was stuck in the house, and at first it was horrible with no routine. But then he spent the day throwing the ball for Dawnay in the garden laughing and being really chilled."

It's still early days in their relationship and some activities still remain out of reach - for example Stanley was taken to a special educational needs screening at the cinema, but struggled to cope with the noise. His energy levels make life sometimes exhausting for his parents.

But in so many other ways Dawnay's influence is having a positive effect and is expanding the family's life. Days out on the coast and the Yorkshire Wildlife Park's

light festival are now possible.

After Dawnay had been with them for only two weeks, the Nuttons went on their family holiday to Mablethorpe, as Stanley loves the beach. "We went into the night-time entertainment, which we hadn't done before but his older sister really wanted to go," says Gemma. "Stanley went in and ran around the dance floor and Dawnay did a settle - she was brilliant!"

Dawnay also has a close bond with Stanley's elder sister, Eva, aged eight, who has autism, but is high functioning, and has anxiety. "Dawnay is like a massive blanket; she goes and sits next to her and licks her face and turns from being upset and anxious to laughter," adds Gemma. "She is great at picking up emotions. She is just the right amount of everything."

Another massive bonus of having Dawnay is that when Stanley goes to shops and cafes with his mum and starts shouting and making a noise, the dog's physical presence makes a potentially awkward situation easier.

People often stare at him because it's not always obvious that he has autism - people just see a naughty child throwing chicken nuggets across the room.

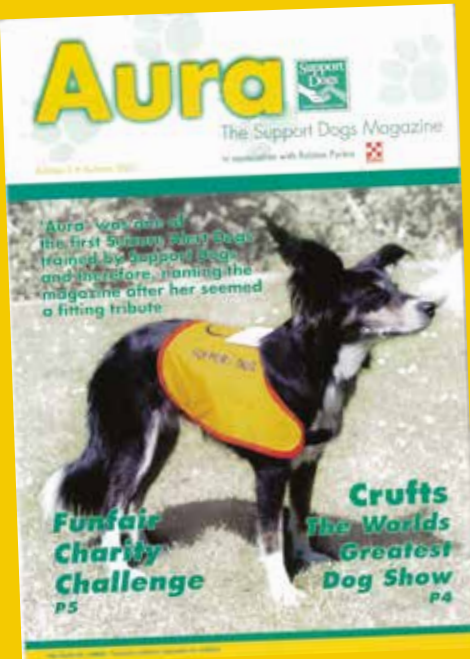
In a Facebook post from February Gemma said: "Normally I get rather anxious with things like this (an after-school treat to McDonalds) on my own just because I hate the stares we can get when Stanley's making his noise.

"However, one of the big things for me personally with Dawnay is that by having her there, people seem to understand more and don't stare - unless they are staring at how gorgeous Dawnay is of course!"

Gemma says of Support Dogs: "When we go out with Dawnay in her jacket people stop and ask questions. It makes it a positive experience and it makes you not feel invisible. Support Dogs has been brilliant, and it's so nice to be part of something that is so special."

For more information about Support Dogs' autism assistance programme go to www.supportdogs.org.uk

Aura - showcasing our success stories over the years



Support Dogs was founded as an assistance dog charity back in 1992. Much has changed since then, as the charity has grown, expanded its activities, helped greater numbers of families, and gained a higher profile.

And yet its core mission remains exactly the same - to give greater independence to people with a variety of medical conditions and physical disabilities. Initially Support Dogs concentrated on training dogs for people with physical disabilities. In 1993 it also started training seizure alert dogs for people with epilepsy. It wasn't until 2008, following a successful pilot study, that it launched a new training programme, training autism assistance dogs for children with autism up to the age of ten.

From 1991 to 2001, supporters of the charity were kept up to date with its activities via a six-monthly newsletter. The very first edition of Aura wasn't published until the charity had been established for nine years, in 2001, when pet food manufacturer Purina offered to fund its printing.

The magazine might look quaintly old-fashioned now, but some things never change. In his very first editorial the then chief executive Paul Master talked

about how impressed he was by the dedication and commitment of staff, and how he valued their down to earth, no-nonsense approach.

If you ever wondered why our magazine is called Aura, it's because Aura was one of the first seizure alert dogs to be trained, and naming the magazine after her seemed a fitting tribute. Aura, a striking collie cross with unforgettable ears is pictured on the front cover of the very first edition in autumn 2001, proudly wearing her yellow jacket. Back then qualified support dogs wore yellow jackets with a red trim, while trained dogs wore red jackets.

Among stories in edition 1 of miniature Schnauzer Sammy, a seizure alert dog, and disability assistance dog Meg, a bonny Lab Retriever, is a piece about a young woman called Angie and her dog Juno, pictured before Angie went up in a glider as part of a fundraising event arranged by the local Rotary Club. Twenty years on Angie is still a Support Dogs' seizure alert client, on her third dog Uskhka, and now a mother of four young children.

Edition 2 from Spring 2002 is also full of interest. The cover star was a beautiful

Golden Retriever called Sally, pictured with her disability client Neil Jackson. Sally's claim to fame was that she was our first-ever support dog, born in 1989. The photo and story was in tribute to "a dog with a selfless attitude and total commitment, that was always there to please, day and night."

Another long-time client of Support Dogs, Kym Stretton, who is now training with her fifth assistance dog, Blade, featured with her second dog Zoe, a German shepherd. Twenty years on Kym is still very heavily involved with Support Dogs and her fourth dog, Marley, has just retired.

Aura's third edition featured a note from President Angela Rippon, celebrating Support Dogs' ten-year anniversary, and with news of filming by Channel 4's Pet Rescue at the training centre. Then, as now, raising the charity's profile was essential to increasing much-needed funds.

Although Aura looks a little different to those early days of the charity, its aim is still to showcase our remarkable success stories and our heart-warming partnerships. We hope you continue to enjoy reading about them.

Three canine heroes change Ann's life

As Support Dogs celebrates its 30th anniversary, long-term client Ann, who has epilepsy, looks back over some memorable moments with her three life-saving seizure alert dogs - and at what life was like before her first support dog.

After Ann Watson was diagnosed with epilepsy in her 20's she was housebound for three years. She was having more than 20 seizures a day and was too afraid to go outside, even into her own garden.

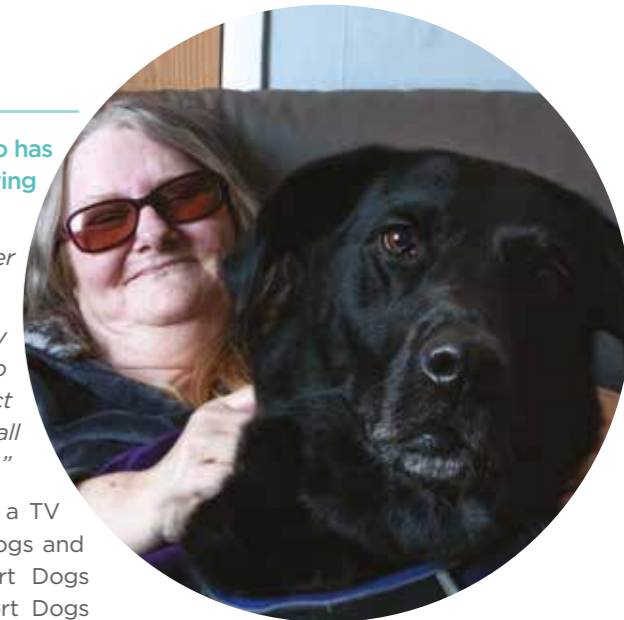
As a result, she had no contact with anyone outside of her immediate family. "It was an incredibly difficult and isolating experience," she recalls.

At that time Ann had three children in their early teens, who acted as her carers, and would bring her round from a seizure using a cold towel. "They were very frightened and unsure of what was

going on, but there was no other help available," says Ann.

"If I had a really bad day my husband would take time off to care for me, which had an impact on his work. As a result, we all suffered from stress and anxiety."

It was husband Peter who saw a TV programme about assistance dogs and suggested applying to Support Dogs for a seizure alert dog. Support Dogs is the only charity in the UK that trains seizure alert dogs to provide a 100 per cent warning of an oncoming epileptic



seizure, giving clients time to get to a safe place to have their seizure.

The result was a life-transforming partnership with her first support dog, border collie Shadow, originally from a rescue centre.

"When I first got a dog, it gave me such a taste of freedom," says Ann. "It was brilliant - I could go shopping, visit friends, instead of them coming to me; it opened up my life and I no longer felt isolated or trapped. I would not be here without Shadow - he saved me so many times from falling down the stairs."

Shadow gave her back her independence and just as importantly, enabled her teenage children to have their own lives too and start taking part in activities outside the family home.

"My youngest son had been preparing to stay at home permanently and become my full-time carer," says Ann. "But after I got Shadow, it was no longer necessary, and he was able to move out and pursue his own career and family."

"It was fantastic and gave me peace of mind. Peter and the kids knew that nothing like what happened before would happen again."

At that time Ann and her family were living in Cumbernauld in Scotland. "It was a small town, and all the shopkeepers knew Shadow, and they would let me go into the back of their shops and have the seizure, then call a taxi to take me home."



Barney, Ann's third support dog, and the light of her life.

She and Peter eventually moved down to South Yorkshire to be closer to Support Dogs' training centre, and when Shadow retired, black Lab Victor took over. Ann and Victor shared a particularly close bond. "Victor was an overgrown baby, full of fun, but he always gave me a 100 per cent reliable alert," says Ann. "He alerted me on my first day of meeting him, and he was always a special boy because of that."

When he retired, Ann had to give him up, which was a massive wrench. However, he went to live with Support Dogs' instructor Tracey Moore who kept Ann updated about him and sent her photos until he died in January this year at the grand old age of 15.

Ask Ann about Barney, her current seizure alert dog, another black Lab, who gives her a 21-minute alert, and her face lights up. At the age of 63, Ann's physical and mental health is not good, but Barney is the light of her

life. Ann's seizures have reduced, but because her mobility is poor, so she can no longer take Barney to the park for regular exercise, relying largely on husband Peter.

"I would not be here without Shadow - he saved me so many times from falling down the stairs."

"When Barney is sitting with me on the sofa, just him being there is such a comfort," she says. "I don't know how I would be without him."

Ann's relationship with Support Dogs goes back many years now and she is full of praise for each and every trainer and instructor she has worked with. "I can't say enough about them - they are

all brilliant. Support Dogs has always been very good to me. I didn't know there was anything like this to help me back then, but ever since that first contact, I have never looked back."

All three of her seizure alert dogs had very different personalities and alerted her in different ways - Barney gives her a hard stare, Victor would paw her and Shadow would bark for 20 minutes.

Ann's 'boys' have made her life immeasurably better. She adds: "If it weren't for my three dogs, I would be dead by now - they have literally saved my life on many occasions. I know for a fact I would not be here if I didn't have them. I am so grateful to Support Dogs for all their help and support over so many years."

Find out more about our seizure alert programme at www.supportdogs.org.uk

Says Diana: "Lennie is lovely, everybody loves her. She is very, very friendly, has a lovely nature."

"She picks things up for me which I really need in a wheelchair. She fetches the phone from upstairs, opens cupboards, fetches the post, loads and unloads the washing machine, helps me take my socks and jacket off and picks up items from low shelves in the supermarkets. I'll probably need her to do more of that if I have knee surgery."

Venturing outside for the first time was daunting as Diana has had agoraphobia in the past, but with support, she conquered her fears.

"I was nervous about going outside with her but with Tracey and Becky with me I felt much more confident. I now have the confidence to go into a busy supermarket. When I stop, she settles; she is just very calming and really, really good in shops."

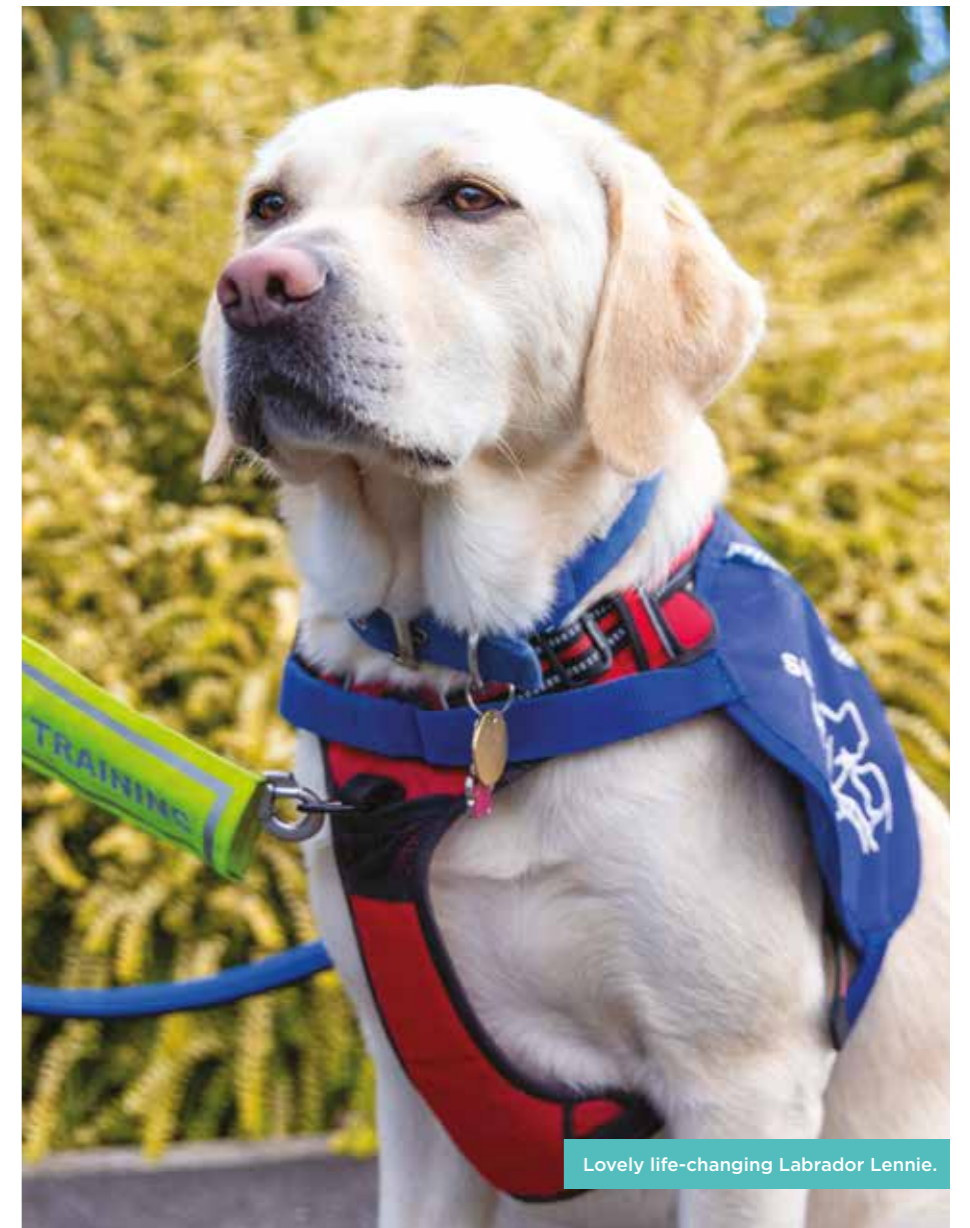
Lennie has also helped Diana with her general health. Thanks to Lennie's loyal support, on the advice of her GP who told her she had pre-diabetes, Diana managed to lose seven stone through dieting and exercise, so avoiding developing the chronic condition and reducing the impact on the NHS.

Diana, who with Lennie, qualified as a disability assistance partnership in September last year, is full of praise for the way Support Dogs' training team have worked with her, tailoring the training to suit her particular needs.

"Support Dogs have been brilliant. Really helpful, and very reassuring. It's been a good, positive experience. I thought it would not be practical for me because it was a long way away but although I've found the travelling difficult it's been worth it."

Instructor Becky Cochran reciprocates. "Lennie is a lovely girl who is always willing to please," she says. "Diana and Lennie are a fantastic partnership who are continuing to grow in confidence together."

Diana adds: "Lennie makes a big difference to me. I She makes me feel more comfortable and I just feel more confident going out with her. It's a big help. She's also a wonderful companion and seems to know if I am feeling down. I would not be without her. Thank you, Support Dogs."



Lovely life-changing Labrador Lennie.

DISABILITY

Lockdown silver lining for Diana and her support dog Lennie

Diana Davies and her Labrador Retriever Lennie qualified as a disability assistance partnership despite starting their training in unpromising circumstances.

The Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown was a gruelling time for most of us, but for Diana Davies, who has severe arthritis and fibromyalgia, there was a silver lining. Her beloved pet dog Lennie, who had just started training as her assistance dog as lockdown hit, was there to provide crucial support.

And since then, she has been invaluable in helping Diana, who has seriously reduced mobility, cope with her multiple health issues by helping her manage day-to-life life, as well as providing important psychological, four-legged assistance.

Diana was one of Support Dogs' first clients to start training her disability assistance dog via video link and Zoom - which was a great success.

"Lennie went to the Support Dogs' centre in Sheffield to start her training

for a month and as she came back lockdown started," says Diana.

"So we then had about a month of learning tasks via video with instructor Hollie. I found lockdown very hard, so it provided me with something to do to get through the mornings. It was really good and gave me something to focus on every day."

Diana, aged 54, who lives in a village in Monmouthshire, South Wales, has had severe arthritis for many years She is waiting for two replacement knees and a new elbow joint. She has problems with her arms and shoulders and has degenerative disc disease in her back. Diana also suffers from anxiety and depression and fibromyalgia and is in constant pain. She uses crutches indoors and an electric wheelchair outside, and not worked for many years.



Diana has always loved dogs and got Lennie initially as a pet. But when she heard about Support Dogs, with the encouragement of her GP, she applied successfully to the disability assistance programme. Despite the inevitable hurdles and setbacks of lockdown, Lennie has done brilliantly.

"She fetches the phone from upstairs, opens cupboards, fetches the post, loads and unloads the washing machine, helps me take my socks and jacket off and picks up items from low shelves in the supermarkets."

Support Dogs' chief executive Rita Howson says: "In 30 years of operating we have never had to train dogs in such challenging circumstances. Lockdown was incredibly difficult for us, and it made the qualification of Diana and Lennie after such a tough time very, very special."



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



“Everything we did for our Alex to fundraise in his memory is so worthwhile when you see this little puppy.”



Alex James, who died following an epileptic seizure.

Support dog of the future Alex makes two families proud

Puppy Alex is keeping the memory alive of a young man called Alex who died after an epileptic seizure.

When this beautiful young Labrador qualifies as a professional assistance dog in the next two years, it will be a source of tears of pride, joy and some sadness for two different families.

For Shaun and Lesley Logan who are volunteer puppy socialisers for Sheffield-based charity Support Dogs. The couple have been looking after Alex since last summer when he was a tiny puppy, and who will continue to care for him and provide basic training for at least another year before he heads off to full-time training.

And for the family of Alex James, a young man who tragically died following an epileptic seizure at the age of 34 in 2015, and after whom puppy Alex is named.

Alex's mum and dad Chris and Peter James have been supporters of the charity since their son's death, and they and their family have raised thousands of pounds to support the progress of puppy Alex. Support Dogs are the only charity in the UK to train dogs to give a 100 per cent guaranteed warning in advance of an epileptic seizure, enabling the person with epilepsy to get to a safe place to have their seizure.

Although they live miles away from the Support Dogs' training centre or from puppy Alex's home in Barnsley, Chris and Peter, from Newbury in Berkshire, are kept up to date with the pup's antics via a What's App group called Alex's Humans. "We share photos and videos and updates of what Alex is up to and we put something in the group just about every

day," explains puppy socialiser Shaun. "I've also done a photo book for Chris and Peter, and I hope they will be able to come and visit before Alex goes off to start 'big school.'"

For Alex's parents, sponsoring puppy Alex and getting such regular updates about his progress makes them feel that they are doing something for their son, and helping others with serious medical conditions.

"The What's App group makes it all so real, to see how this little puppy is coming along," says Chris. "It's so good for those of us who have lost someone and are fundraising for the charity to have a relationship and a link with the puppy socialisers.

"It's been amazing for us. Everything we

did for our Alex to fundraise in his memory is so worthwhile when you see this little puppy. It's been so beneficial for us to see what Shaun and Lesley are doing with him - they are brilliant and so committed."

Puppy Alex is shooting up and at eight months old is now more of an adolescent dog than a pup, all legs and ears. As well as being strikingly attractive - his sister Bon Bon is also a beautiful dog and is known to the puppy socialisers as Brigitte Bardot - Alex is a fast learner. When Shaun gets ready to take him out for a walk Alex goes into the porch and fetches his hat and gloves off the radiator in anticipation. He loves having fun too and playing and playfighting with the Logan's elderly Patterdale terrier.

"He attends to puppy classes and is learning the basics - sit, wait, lie down," explains Shaun. "His recall is like an Exocet missile. I always use a whistle to indicate food so every time he hears a whistle when we're out walking, he associates it with food and he comes back like a shot." The Logans took part in the recent Support Dogs' Santa Paws Walk in Endcliffe Park, and regularly take Alex to their caravan on the North York Moors so the pup is getting lots of life experience.

Support Dogs' puppies stay with their socialisers until the age of about 15 months when they start formal training, so the Logans know their time with Alex is limited. But while they have him, both Shaun and Lesley, who started volunteering for Support Dogs when they retired, are loving the experience.

"I had a stroke a few years ago and after the stroke the only thing that got me moving was having two dogs - they provided the impetus to get out and about," says Shaun. "I got such benefit out of the dogs I thought if I could do something like that for someone else to get the benefit, then why not."

The connection with Chris and Peter James makes their experience even more special. For the James's, although the association is inevitably tinged with sadness, it is also positive.

"Alex's epilepsy was not under control, but despite that he lived life to the full and didn't let his condition stop him doing anything he wanted to do," says Chris.

Alex did well at school, going on to have successful career in the banking and telecom sectors, and was a huge Arsenal fan. His parents recall that after a major seizure they sat by his hospital bed for hours while Alex grew more and more concerned that he would miss an Arsenal game and was desperate to discharge himself.

After he died his parents asked for donations to Support Dogs in lieu of flowers, and family and friends have been generous over the years, taking part in marathons and sponsored events in his memory.

"Obviously I'd love puppy Alex to become a seizure alert dog to help people with epilepsy, but whatever he ends up doing we'll be so proud," says Chris. "It's a great thing for us to do - to sponsor puppy Alex - because it feels like we are doing something for our Alex."

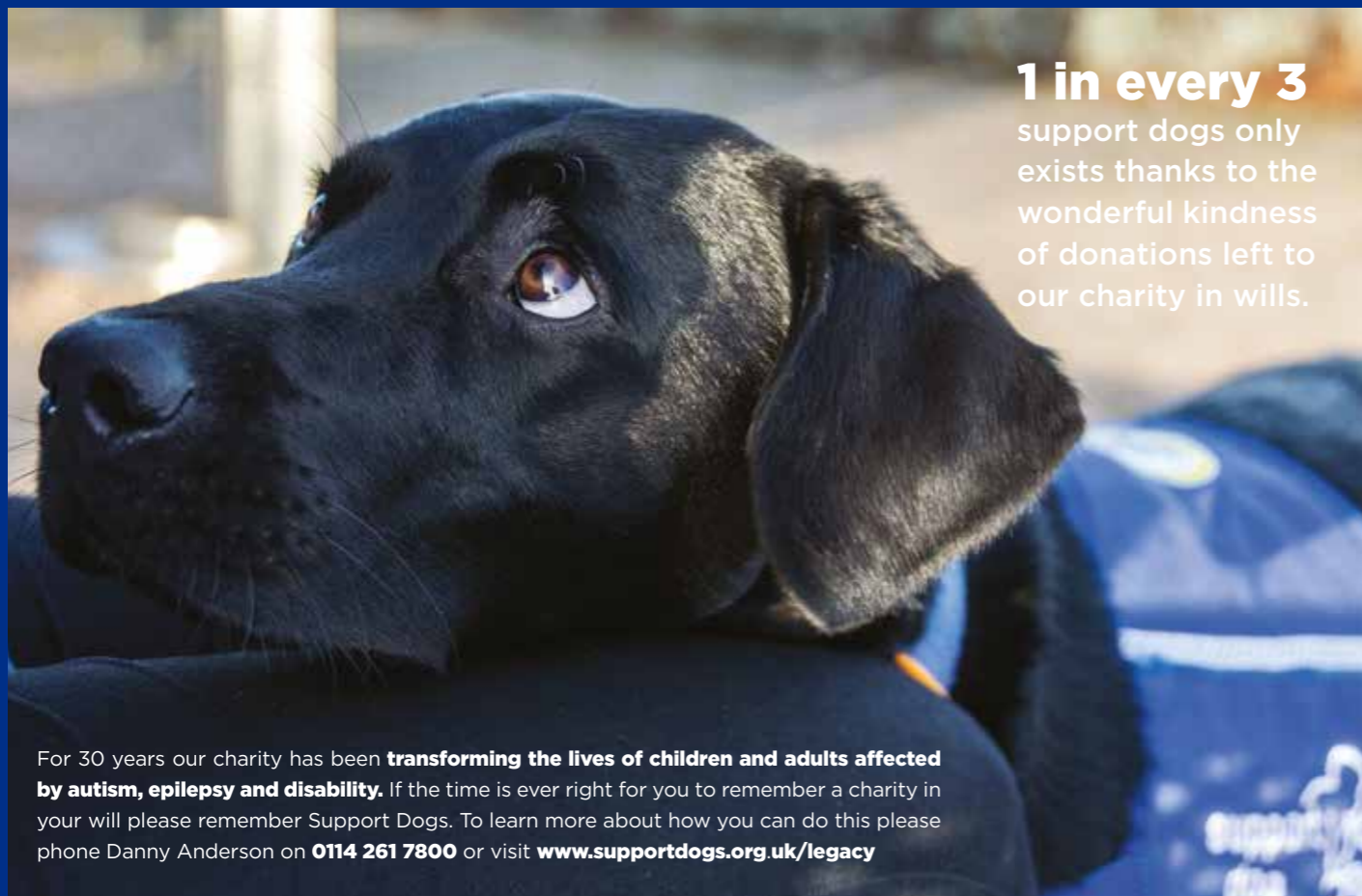
Many of our wonderful supporters have chosen to name a puppy in memory of a loved one. If you would like to find out more information about doing this, please do contact us or visit our website for more information: www.supportdogs.org.uk/in-memory-giving



Puppy socialiser Shaun Logan with Alex.

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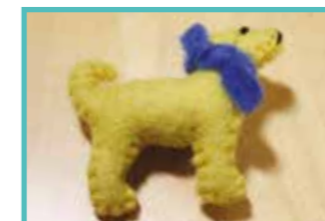
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Your £5 a month could **train a support dog** to be able to search, bring life-saving medication and call for help if its client becomes ill.

£10

Your £10 a month could provide **24 hours of vital care** by a support dog for someone affected by epilepsy.

£20

Your £20 a month could enable the **first visit for a child with autism** to meet their future support dog at their home.



RUPERT

Breed: Labrador **Job:** Disability assistance
Home: Cumbria **Birthday:** 30th September



MARKY

Breed: Labrador **Job:** Autism assistance
Home: South Yorkshire **Birthday:** 26th March



IGGY

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



TINKERBELL

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



WOLFY

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



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