

Aura

Support Dogs' charity magazine

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Edition 41

Support Dogs' superdog Tinks joins CBeebies' Dog Squad



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Making Jacob happy: how Labrador Jai Jayy is bringing calm to an anxious autistic boy.
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Top dog Teddy: the disability assistance dog is keeping Diana in the job she loves.
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supportdogs 
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MESSAGE FROM RITA...

The cost of living

In 2018 we roughly calculated that our charity saves the NHS and other public health services at least £19 million a year.

This figure was based on the reduction in use of health care services our clients have reported since the introduction of their support dog. We looked at reported costs for services such as ambulance call outs, inpatient hospital stays, medication costs, GP appointments and many others. We then calculated the figure based on the number of clients we support each year.

We are all aware of how the world and especially costs have changed since then. While we have not done a recent calculation, due partly to the fact that costs have been changing so quickly, we are confident that the savings impact of our charity now goes way beyond that £19 million estimate.

Sadly, these rising costs have a real impact on the work of our charity too. The cost for our charity to save lives and help those affected by autism, epilepsy and disability has risen. Like so many of the people we support, we are worried about the rising heating, petrol and electricity costs. These costs have an impact on our work and our ability to continue to maintain and strive to grow our vital, life-saving services.

We receive no government funding and we provide our services entirely free of charge. The inspiring, heart-warming stories you read in this magazine are only thanks to the wonderful kindness of the public.

We are aware that all our supporters are facing challenges at the moment and are so grateful to anyone who has continued to support us through this period and



ask you please not to forget the value of the work you are helping. Even simply sponsoring a support dog for £5 a month is hugely important to our charity and our ability to plan and use our resources effectively.

For those of you who are unable to support us financially there are other ways you can still support us. From volunteering as a puppy socialiser to simply collecting and donating used stamps. Whatever you can do makes a huge difference to our work and the lives of those we support.

Thank you.

Rita Howson
Chief executive

Green initiatives for Support Dogs

Support Dogs are committed to reducing our impact on the environment. We strive to improve our charity's environmental performance and initiate ways to reduce our impact on the environment.

We've already begun this process by changing the materials we use, from ensuring our magazine is made and packaged in recyclable paper, changing our poo bags from plastic to biodegradable and introducing a range of toys made from 100% recycled products. We also work to reduce our carbon footprint by equipping staff with the means to work from home, to reduce journeys, allow more interactions with clients to be done on Zoom rather than unnecessary journeys to our centre and introducing a hybrid fleet car to the charity.



You can learn more about the steps we are taking at www.supportdogs.org.uk/environmental-policy

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 autistic children. 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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To sponsor a dog today call Support Dogs on

0114 261 7800

to donate visit

www.supportdogs.org.uk



Experiencing and marking the loss of a support dog

Support Dogs are looking to develop a new project to better support our clients through the period of retirement and death of their support dog.

It takes two years to train a support dog to provide vital care for a client. Once trained, a support dog provides 24/7 life-saving care through its entire working life, until it retires at approximately 10 years of age. As well as the significant support the client receives for their medical needs, they also of course build an exceptionally strong, personal bond with their dog, with them being rarely apart throughout those years.

Sadly, a time comes within each relationship between a support dog and their client where the dog's working role will end, whether through the dog's retirement or death. The transition to a support dog's retirement can be difficult for our clients, with multiple feelings of loss and grief. Even though the support dog may not have died, the essence of the partnership has ended. Once retired, often the dog will remain living with the client, until its life comes to an end, when of course the client experiences a second period of grief.

Our clients have told us how difficult these periods of loss can be. Grief is very personal and unique to each individual, yet our clients often have to go through it twice with each dog. While retirement is often predictable and our charity has a two-year planning process to support our clients through this, occasionally retirement comes unexpectedly early perhaps due to an unexpected sudden change to the dog's health.

Support Dogs are now developing a project to understand the process that our clients go through more clearly. We wish to provide a pioneering programme of support so that our clients receive the best care during these difficult periods so it doesn't result in a significant deterioration in their own physical and mental health. Fear of the dog's ill health leading to premature retirement can understandably mean that a client may be reluctant to report changes in their support dog's



Wonderful autism assistance dog Jay, who sadly died in 2020 after a long career.

behaviour or health. We hope that by developing this new project we will also be able to ensure improvements in the wellbeing of our support dogs in their later years.

The loss of a support dogs can equally be difficult for partners or other family members, who will be grieving themselves but also want to help their loved one who the dog was partnered with. How we can support them through this process will also be included in this project. Many clients and

volunteers also tell us how important it is to them for a support dog they have cared for to have a formal process of recognition and remembrance when they die. As we reach our 30th year, this is something we would like to create.

If you would be interested in finding out more, supporting or helping with funding for this project please contact danny.anderson@supportdogs.org.uk

Super seizure alert dog Cobble transforms life for policewoman Nicola



Life is finally looking up for mum-of-two Nicola Neal. The formerly fit and active Met police officer developed severe epilepsy seven years ago after falling and banging her head in the supermarket.

As the number of seizures grew to six major and eight minor ones a week, she suffered serious injuries caused by falling that required hospital treatment. She even had to have four skin grafts after falling onto a hot iron and severely burning herself.

The full-time mum was on anti-depressants and wondering what the point of life was when she and husband Mick found out about Support Dogs and applied to its epilepsy seizure alert programme. Matched with Lab Retriever cross Cobble, Nicola's life was transformed, with the amazing dog giving her a 100 per cent guaranteed alert 37 minute before a seizure. The pair qualified as a partnership last month and since then the number of her seizures has dropped dramatically.

Nicola, now back at work, says: "Everything is so much brighter than before. I can't thank Support Dogs enough for what Cobble has done for me. He has completely changed our lives."

You can read Nicola and Cobble's full story in the next edition of *Aura*, out spring 2023.

Support Dogs teams up with The Snowman

Penguin Random House Children's has teamed up with Support Dogs to create a special education pack for schools, to increase awareness and understanding of the life changing impact that dogs can have.

The pack has been created to celebrate 10 years of friendship and fun with *The Snowman*™ and *the Snowdog*, the magical sequel inspired by the late Raymond Briggs' timeless picture book, *The Snowman*™. First broadcast on Channel 4 in 2012, the animated sequel together with the film adaption of *The Snowman*™ have become an intrinsic part of festive family traditions each year.

2022 also marks the 40th anniversary of *The Snowman*™ film and the 30th anniversary of the founding of Support Dogs so there are plenty of reasons to celebrate this year!

Kelly Robinson, Global Brand Marketing Executive at Penguin Random House Children's said: "Pets can play an important role in our lives. They are much

loved friends and offer comfort and companionship. We have partnered with Support Dogs, during this celebratory year for *The Snowman and the Snowdog*, to teach children about the important role they play and the different, wonderful ways that support dogs can truly make a life-changing difference to people living with a wide range of challenging medical conditions."

Danny Anderson, fundraising manager at Support Dogs said: "We are thrilled to be partnering with Penguin Random House Children's. Public awareness of the incredible impact that assistance dogs can have is still limited and we really hope this education pack gives more children, parents and teachers the opportunity to learn and explore the vital life-saving



difference our dogs can make. Our ultimate aim is to continue to train more dogs for children and adults affected by autism, epilepsy and disability."

The pack will be shared with a network of schools across the country via the Puffin Schools Facebook channel. You can also download the pack at www.puffinschools.co.uk

YOU can be AMAZING in 2023!

Now more than ever, we need the support of people like you to help us change the lives of people with autism, epilepsy and disabilities by taking part in our exciting fundraising challenges. We are here to support you throughout your fundraising journey and can assist you in finding the right event for you.

Get in touch for an informal chat:
fundraising@supportdogs.org.uk
or 0114 2617800

Millers Dale Bridge Abseil Saturday 20th May

Take part in our abseil at the iconic Millers Dale Bridge on the Monsal Trail. Abseil down the 90 ft drop over the beautiful narrow gorge of the River Wye – gorgeous views guaranteed! You will be guided by fully qualified abseil instructors, all safety equipment provided.



Fundraising target: £50

Great North Run Sunday 10th September

The world-famous half marathon takes you from Newcastle city centre to the coast at South Shields. The world's biggest and best half marathon – famous for its warm North East welcome and unbeatable atmosphere. All runners receive a Support Dogs' running vest and a shiny new special edition Great North Run medal upon finishing. Take it to the next level by running in one of our Scooby Doo outfits!



Fundraising target: £325

Adidas Manchester Marathon Sunday 16th April

Take part in the 4th largest marathon in Europe on the UK's flattest major marathon route in the heart of Manchester. Suitable for runners of all abilities, the 26.2 mile route takes you through Manchester city centre to Altrincham before heading back to the finish line at Old Trafford, taking in the incredible Mancunian support throughout the course. An unforgettable experience for any marathon runner.



Fundraising target: £325

Inflatable 5km Challenge Throughout the year

The world's largest and best fun run the 'Inflatable 5K' has got even bigger and bouncier! With 32 gigantic obstacles and five pumping music zones to keep you motivated around the course, this is a fun filled event for the whole family, suitable for ages 5+. Events are held across the country with distances from 2.5K to 15K between April and October. To find an event near you, visit our website or get in touch.



Fundraising target: £50

SUPPORT DOGS LOTTERY

Support Dogs lottery is now live, and you can win up to **£10,000 every week!**



To enter simply text **Dog to 88000** and follow the link.

Alternatively visit www.supportdogs.org.uk/lottery

Tickets are **£2 each** and you can register to have up to five tickets a week. You then get texted your numbers each week and contacted if you win. You can cancel simply by text at any time.

This is a great way to support our life-changing work on a regular basis. So please do enter and share with your friends.

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 the evenings and at weekends for a trainee support dog.
- **Adult dog socialisers** providing full-time care from home for an older dog before their training begins.

Find out more at:
supportdogs.org.uk/volunteer
or call 0114 2617800

Did you know?
If you have a pet dog, you can still become a puppy socialiser!

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.

Katerina and Frida Macaulay raised £225 through a sponsored read-a-thon, making their way through 20 books in the process.

Chris Bagworth and Kelly Hill who raised £700 after so kindly asking for donations to our charity instead of gifts on their wedding day.

Sheffield artist Pete Mckee who raised over £5,000 through a special evening of conversation and sales of artwork.

Spring Golf Club who made Support Dogs their charity of the year, raising over £24,000.

Amanda Gates who took on the challenge of the Berlin Marathon and raised £1,030.

Training for Paws who raised £210 after running a dog training taster session.

Rob Webster who asked for donations as his retirement gift from colleagues and raised £445.

Pauline and Kevin McAllister who have raised over £2,600 through selling items for Support Dogs at local flea markets.

Sam Moore and Lily Paws Dog Grooming who raised over £2,000 after organising a sponsored dog walk over the summer.

Nova Hair who have raised over £300 from keeping a collection tin for the charity in their salon.

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

Thurstonland Community Choir whose beautiful singing raised over £600 for Support Dogs.

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



Making Jacob happy

Jai Jayy the fox-red Labrador is bringing calm and happiness to an anxious little autistic boy.

It all seems like a bad dream now, but for the first six years of her little boy's life the only way mum Rachel could get him round the supermarket was to put him in a shopping trolley, completely covered by his coat.

Attempts to get Jacob into nursery ended in him screaming the place down. Life was so tough that Rachel had to give up work to devote all her time to the youngster, diagnosed with severe autism and anxiety just before his third birthday.

Things are very different now for Rachel, partner Delton, and their son, now seven, ever since a beautiful fox-red Labrador called Jai Jayy bounded into their lives.

Rachel and Delton were on Support Dogs' waiting list for three years - longer than usual due to the pandemic - and Rachel admits that she never actually thought they would be successful in their quest for an autism assistance dog.

But now, Rachel and Jai Jayy have qualified as a partnership, Jacob is transformed by his relationship with his new canine chum, life is looking so much more positive for the family from Sheffield, and Rachel says: "Getting Jai Jayy and being involved with Support Dogs is the best thing I have ever done."

Jacob was diagnosed with autism after failing to start speaking and having very poor mobility as a toddler. He suffered from extreme anxiety even as a baby and would scream if Rachel took him outside.

"It was very hard work," recalls Rachel, who is now back in work as a part-time support worker in the renal unit at the Northern General Hospital. "I used to work in the community as a support worker but had to quit my job as I couldn't cope."

Jacob struggled at nursery school and Rachel was regularly called to come and fetch him home because his behaviour was affecting other children.

Autism affected the family's life in every way. "We persevered with him, but it wasn't easy," says Rachel. "On the rare occasion that we went out for meal we'd usually have to leave after half an hour. Supermarkets were a nightmare. We could



Jacob and Jai Jayy have fun in their local park.

never him into the park - it was hard to even get him out of the house!

"When we went round to my mum's house for Christmas, he would go upstairs and sit in the room out of the way, with his tablet."

Rachel and Delton found out about Support Dogs after meeting another family who had benefited from the charity.

That positive experience persuaded

Rachel to think that a dog could also help Jacob, and so it proved.

"Jacob was so excited to get Jai Jayy," smiles Rachel. "They had an instant bond, a bond I just can't describe. I would never have thought a dog could make such a difference."

Unlike many young children with autism, Jacob is clingy rather than being a bolter, and doesn't need preventing from running



Jacob and Jai Jayy relax at home with mum Rachel.

off into the road and harming himself. But he still gets very worked up and anxious, and Jai Jayy's skill is to calm him down.

"Jacob is so happy to see Jai Jayy when he comes home from school, and seems happier in himself," says Rachel. "He's like his best friend."

From an educational perspective, Jacob is now making great progress. He is now able to say a few words, and attends a mainstream school which has integrated resources available to children with learning difficulties and other complex needs, where he gets one to one attention but also exposure to other children.

Rachel gives a few of examples of how the family's life has improved for the better since the arrival of Jai Jayy. "He doesn't hide away anymore," she says. "A friend of mine has a couple of hyperactive kids and Jacob's never been able to cope with them. The other week she came round, and I was getting ready for him to leg it upstairs, but he just sat on the settee. Such a difference!"

Going out for meals now presents no difficulty, thanks to Jai Jayy's attentions. They go to the park. The family have always gone to a caravan in Scarborough and Jacob could just about cope with going to the beach and coming straight back to the caravan. This year they are planning to be a bit more adventurous....

"Jacob was so excited to get Jai Jayy. They had an instant bond, a bond I just can't describe. I would never have thought a dog could make such a difference."

"Just having Jai Jayy there just reassures Jacob, I think," adds Rachel. "Having Jai Jayy has really changed things for us."

Jacob has really taken to Tracey Moore, Support Dogs' instructor who is working with him and his mum and Jayy Jai. A recent visit revealed the youngster's sense of fun.

Tracey says: "Any time I go to visit them, Jacob takes me on the swings and slide, and we also have to do running races. On our last visit, Jacob laid at the top of the hill in the park, and announced he was going to roly-poly down the hill, but he wanted me to accompany him too. How could I refuse? So there we were rolling down the hill together - only in this job!"

Mum Rachel swallows hard and becomes emotional when asked about what qualification as an autism assistance partnership means to her and her family. She says finally: "Everything. What Support Dogs has done for Jacob is wonderful. The trainers and instructors have been brilliant. It has been a good journey; a very positive experience."

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

Support dog Tinks joins CBeebies' Dog Squad



Tiny bundle of fluff AKA disability assistance dog Tinks is already a mini superstar at Support Dogs

But now the little Lhasa Apso, who has been a disability assistance dog for client Charli Colquhoun for the past two years, is set for wider fame as one of the canine stars of the new CBeebies series *'Dog Squad'*.

Tinks is one of five working dogs selected by the BBC to take part in the new 15-episode series which combines live action with animation and follows the pooches and their owners or handlers on a series of missions in which they show off their particular life-changing abilities.

In the programme Tinks - who is voiced by actress Joanna Paige of Gavin and Stacey fame - and her canine chums go on a number of adventures. The three

episodes in which she stars showcases Tinks' skills at fetching help, picking up lost or dropped items and generally helping Charli cope with a variety of scenarios - getting ready for a party, finding a birthday present, and doing some gardening.

For Charli, filming the series over five days in Glasgow earlier this year brought back many happy memories. Charli worked in the BBC's children's department for a number of years before becoming ill and being diagnosed with the progressive genetic condition Ehlers Danloss Syndrome, which causes hypermobile, painful joints and fatigue and has left her reliant on a wheelchair,

After the diagnosis of the syndrome and also Crohn's disease put an end to her career in her early 30s,

Charli went through some dark times before applying to Support Dogs to train her puppy Tinks to be her disability support dog.

Since then, the pair have been inseparable, with Tinks providing invaluable help around Charli's London flat, and providing lots of canine support.

That relationship is mirrored in Dog Squad, although Charli found it initially quite challenging to reproduce. *"I talk to Tinks all the time in real life but usually in private not in front of a film crew so sometimes it was hard to perform in front of a camera,"* she says.

Filming meant very long days for someone with Charli's chronic condition and for a dog the size of Tinks, but although she sometimes struggled with fatigue and brain fog, Charli says the



whole experience had been brilliant.

She adds: *"It was tough for Tinks as she had to repeat a lot of the actions before she knew what she was doing before filming, but it was well worth it; it's been amazing."*

Charli says she hopes the publicity surrounding Dog Squad will shine a light on the life-transforming work done by assistance dog charities, in particular Support Dogs.

"They are all working dogs taking part in the show, not actor dogs, and it's easy to forget that because they perform for the camera so well," she says. *"I hope viewers realise that Tinks and I are team with a professional working partnership, we're not just acting a part."*

Dog Squad is broadcast on CBeebies and available on the BBC iPlayer.

Top dog Teddy gives Diana a new lease of life

Disability assistance dog Teddy is helping Diana continue working in the job she loves.

Labradoodle Teddy started life as a pet puppy for Diana Smith's young daughter, to help her get through a family tragedy.

But shortly afterwards, Diana, aged 50, who has a rare neurological condition which has left her using a wheelchair, decided that Teddy would make an ideal assistance dog.

And now as her son has left home and her daughter prepares to go to university, Diana will be relying even more heavily on Teddy to keep her independent. He will also enable her to continue in the job she loves, working with children with special educational needs at her local primary school.

Teddy is already popular among children and staff and provides practical help for Diana as she manoeuvres her wheelchair around the school, where he has been trained to push buttons to open heavy school doors, and press lift buttons.

Teddy came into her life at its lowest ebb.

"I have a medical condition called functional neurological disorder (FND), a little-known disorder of the brain and nervous system, and suffered two strokes, the first one in 2013, and a second a couple of years later," explains Diana, who came to the UK 22 years ago from Ukraine and now lives in Woolwich, south-west London.



"In between these two events my husband Steve died of heart failure at the age of 50. It was a rollercoaster, and initially we got Teddy as a puppy for my daughter Anna because we were all suffering."

Diana was working as a music teacher and also a teaching assistant working with special educational needs children at a primary school in Plumstead but had to give up work for nine months after the first stroke.

Intense physio helped her to get back on her feet, but after the second stroke she needed speech therapy to repair her slurred speech and struggled with headaches and memory problems. After rehab Diana eventually went back to work in a wheelchair on reduced hours and with reduced responsibilities.

At this point she started to think about getting Teddy trained as an assistance dog.

"I was struggling with tasks around the house which I really couldn't do or had to call my son or daughter to help with," says Diana. "My son Pavel is now at university and my daughter was due to go in September so I knew I would be on my own and needed extra help."

Diana started searching what help might be available and found Support Dogs' disability assistance programme. Initially she thought she lived too far away from its training centre in Sheffield, but the pair successfully passed all the assessments. Diana and Teddy were among the first disability partnerships to qualify since the pandemic.

Teddy now provides invaluable practical help and support around the house as well as at school, picking up dropped items and loading the washing machine. Diana lives in a house that has been specially adapted for her needs but has doors that are hard to open and close, so Teddy helps with that. He has also been trained to help her get out of her mobility scooter into a wheelchair by pushing the wheelchair towards her.

"We work together very well," says Diana. "Teddy is our soul, a family member – in fact he is the head of the house, the boss! He is also very sensitive; he knows when I don't feel well and comes and lies on me to comfort me. He has a very soft nature and is very clever; he understands everything."



Teddy and Diana: the best of friends.

"Teddy and I work together very well. He is our soul, a family member - in fact he is the head of the house, the boss!"

Cute Teddy is also a big hit with pupils and Diana's colleagues at school. *"He is very good around children. He comes with me to the staff meetings and with his loud yawn lets the headteacher know that he talks a lot and it's time to finish – and everyone appreciates that,"* she says.

Diana says her experience of working with Support Dogs has been overwhelmingly

positive. *"It's amazing how the whole team works together. When we came up to Sheffield it felt like a family, and everyone was so happy to see Teddy. And we had balloons and cake when we qualified!"*

Diana's FND, whose symptoms can include limb weakness, paralysis, seizures and walking difficulties and can be stress and overwork-related, may or may not get worse over time. But with her adored dog by her side, she can face the future with more confidence. She adds: *"Teddy is a lovely dog, and the light of my life. I'm so grateful to Support Dogs for training him to meet my needs."*

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

Jack the Lab

How the popular pooch is lightening the life of client Charlotte, who has MS.

After many years of being laid low by the debilitating effects of MS, Charlotte Gannon made a decision that would completely change her life.

She and her husband Leo decided to buy a Labrador, with a view of getting him trained as a disability assistance dog.

"We bought Jack in the hope that he would be a support dog, although we'd have kept him as a pet dog even if he hadn't been accepted onto the training programme," says Charlotte, now 48.

Charlotte applied to Support Dogs when Jack was 18 months old. Two years later, the pair have now qualified as a partnership, and Jack is providing essential day-to-day support, helping Charlotte to continue to run her craft shop, and enabling her to lead a life independent of her family.

Charlotte's MS started to develop in 2008 and she was diagnosed two years later. *"By that time, I'd lost all the feeling all the way up to my waist, so it was well advanced by the time I went to the GP,"* she recalls. *"I was in my mid-30s, had two young children, and I could not walk further than a couple of meters."*

As well as being a young mum, Charlotte was earning a living quilting and fabric making, and spent a lot of time at craft fairs. *"That involved lots of lifting and shifting heavy gear setting up a stall, and I could no longer do that,"* she says.

"Pretty much everything stopped. My sons Benedict and Daniel, who are now 24 and 19, were youngsters then. I couldn't go out, and I basically spent all my time at home. I could still use my hands and sew and make things, thankfully."

"This carried on for about eight years. I had to bite the bullet and use a mobility scooter. My husband was always very supportive, but he worked full time. It was a tough time and I got very low."

A visit to Crufts sparked off the idea that Charlotte might benefit from an assistance dog, and the Gannons bought Jack from the daughter of one of Charlotte's

friends from her sewing group, who bred Labradors. He was put through puppy training and then accepted onto the Support Dogs' disability programme.

"Training went very well, and Jack did very well – it was a bit of a nerve-racking rollercoaster at each stage of the training hoping he would pass, but it was also fun," explains Charlotte.

Her remitting/relapsing MS is currently fairly stable, although Charlotte always has to pace herself. After a day at Support Dogs' training centre, she was wiped out with fatigue and pain for a week.

"Everybody loves Jack. He loves going to the pub because they all love him. He is well known in the town; he's a very popular dog."

"The main thing I wanted Jack to do for me was to pick things up when I drop them, which happens a lot," she says. *"When I open up my shop, I usually drop the bolts from the shutters, so he picks those up. He also takes off my socks and cardigan at the end of the day when I'm exhausted and gets me the remote control."*



Charlotte and Jack in Quilters' Corner.

"I'm not using my scooter all the time at the moment, and Jack helps me balance and to walk in a straight line. I don't need to use a stick when I've got him with me."

For the past seven years, Charlotte has run a small craft shop called Quilters' Corner in Evesham. She has built up a loyal customer base and Jack is a constant presence in the shop. Charlotte says: *"Jack lightens the mood, and if I'm feeling down, he is great for a cuddle."*

Jack is also well known in Evesham. *"Jack is daft. He loves everybody and wants to say hello to everyone,"* says Charlotte. *"He loves going to the pub because they all love him. He is well-known in the town; he's a very popular dog. Lots of people have offered to re-home him if I found I couldn't look after him."*

Happily, given the success of the partnership that seems an unlikely possibility.

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

A very Special K

Nine-year-old Kurtis and his autism assistance dog Kelly share more than just an initial – since May last year the pair have been sharing an increasingly happy and altogether less stressful life together.

Like many autistic youngsters Kurtis Hickins doesn't say a great deal. The young boy from Mexborough in South Yorkshire tends to stick to the occasional word or simple request or repeats phrases from films he likes.

So, when mum Linda heard her son, who was upset about something, say loudly: 'Need Kelly,' she knew it was significant. Kurtis and Kelly had only been training together for three months but the bond that had developed between boy and dog was strong, and already Kelly was providing the calming, reassuring presence that Kurtis needs so badly.

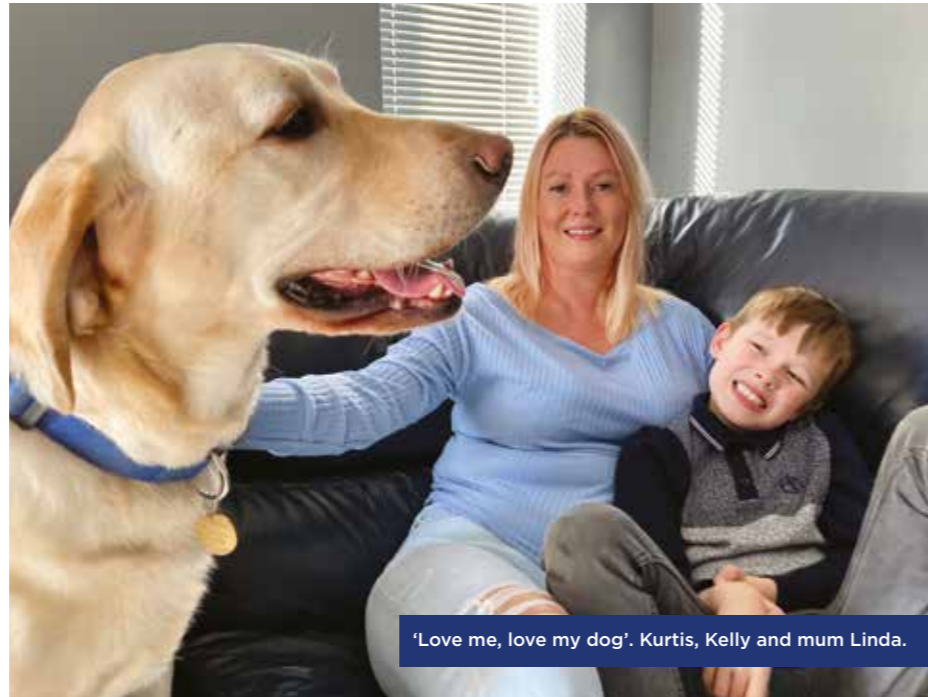
"When Kurtis has a meltdown in the house we sit him on the settee, then get Kelly to rest on him and he almost instantly snaps out of it," explains Linda. *"She helps him calm down so that he feels safe, secure and happy. And when Kurtis has calmed down, he thanks Kelly for making him feel better, and says: 'Beautiful.'"*

Before the yellow Labrador became a valuable part of the Hickin family, Linda, partner Craig, Kurtis and daughter Polly Jean, now seven, struggled to enjoy the usual activities.

"He had good and bad days and normal life was restricted; there was no consistency, so it was hard to plan anything," says Linda.

"Kurtis is all or nothing – either hyper, bouncing around or jumping, or like a snail. Leaving the house to do anything as a family could be difficult and unpredictable."

Kurtis was also a regular bolter – a term commonly used by families with autism when a child with autism suddenly runs off from a parent or care giver with no warning – once running straight across the road when he came out of school. While out shopping, just seeing escalators and broccoli – both things he likes – could set him off. He would drop to the floor in the middle of a shop and have meltdowns if anything, however small, went wrong.



'Love me, love my dog'. Kurtis, Kelly and mum Linda.

Going out to eat in a restaurant as a family was stressful and often resulted in a rapid exit.

Kurtis was diagnosed with autism at the age of three, with elements of dyspraxia and ADHD. His parents at first thought he was just lazy and a bit quirky but although he started to talk, he then regressed.

After starting at mainstream nursery and



reception, Kurtis was switched to a special school nearby, where he gets one-to-one attention and is making good progress.

His parents were unaware of autism assistance dogs and were investigating the possibility of a therapy dog for their son when they happened upon Support Dogs. *"The more I learnt about what autism assistance dogs could do for a child, I just knew it was for us,"* says Linda.

Although they were accepted onto the autism programme, because of the Covid lock down their training programme was delayed, and the Hickins had to wait three years before their son was successfully matched with Kelly.

Autism assistance dog Kelly had been with Support Dogs since she was just eight weeks' old and was a shining star since her arrival, progressing brilliantly through her two-year training programme. During her time at the centre the training team described her as a lovely, gentle dog, and absolutely perfect to work with a child with autism – giddy and fun-loving at times but



Kurtis and Kelly are inseparable.

calm when she needed to be.

It was those qualities, and an ability to remain unfazed by any of Kurtis's behaviour that enabled her to be his ideal partner. Very quickly Kurtis became a calmer, happier child, having fewer meltdowns, and the whole family bonded with her in different ways. Although Kelly sleeps downstairs, she and Kurtis cuddle up in bed before he goes to sleep, and in the morning when she hears the house stirring, she's back up with a teddy bear for Kurtis to wake him up.

Since Kelly arrived, the Hickins have been able to go on a caravan holiday and enjoy the seaside, they can go for a meal, for walks, or impromptu visits to a pub beer garden – all the things that most families take for granted.

"I love seeing the pair of them running together, and I love walking around with them, and seeing how everyone smiles at them. Kelly loves the interaction with people, as she gets lots of attention," says Linda.

"People are so much more understanding when they see Kurtis with Kelly in her Support Dogs' jacket. She makes an absolute difference and is such a reassuring presence. If he gets overwhelmed, he puts his head on Kelly's back and pats her. We put her jacket on, attach Kurtis to her harness and it's 'let's go!'"

Kurtis and Kelly qualified as a partnership a year ago after Kelly passed all her assessments. *"Kelly had to do some task work with Kurtis and me, and it went amazingly well – they are so natural together,"* says Linda.

"Kelly then went on a free run where she did amazing sits, stands, waits and call backs – she was even tempted by a squirrel but handled that temptation really well. We're so proud of Kelly and the partnership – they've come on so well in such a short time."

Life is now looking a lot less stressful for the Hickin family, and for Kurtis in particular, thanks to this very special dog.

A year on from qualifying, Linda says

the days of meltdowns and bolting are a distant memory, thanks to Kelly's calming influence. Kurtis is becoming more verbal and is like a different child.

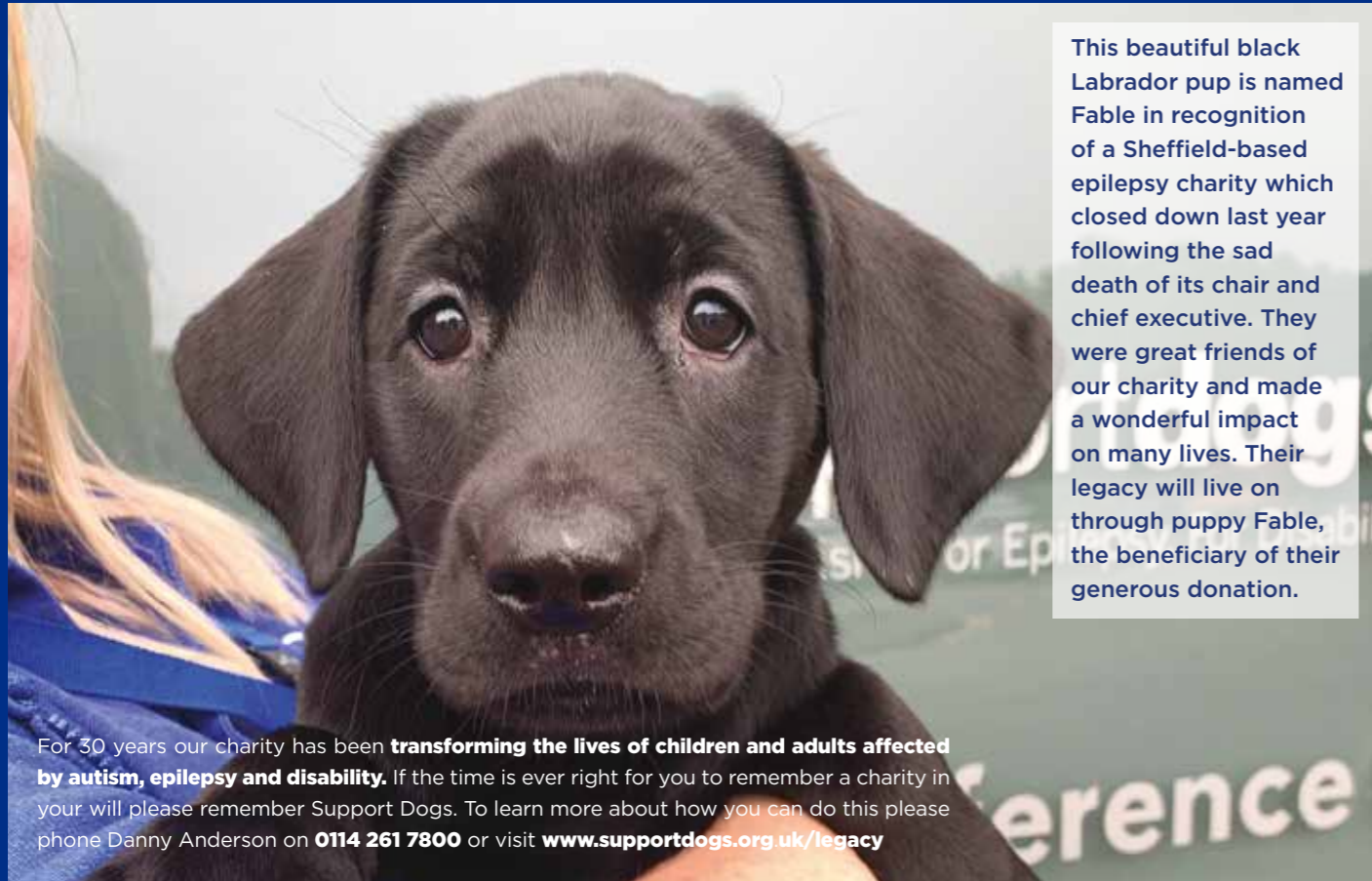
"We're 100 per cent happy with Kelly and with Support Dogs," says Linda. *"I just wish we could have had her sooner. These dogs are like gold dust and as a family we are privileged to have one. She has stolen our hearts!"*



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

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Home: London **Birthday:** 13th July



MARKY

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



IGGY

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



RUPERT

Breed: Labrador **Job:** Disability assistance
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