



Golden Years feature 8 PAGES

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GOLDEN YEARS

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A little help from your friend

Kevin Picker can help the elderly and disabled gain a new lease on life by bonding them with a caring canine. He explains to Peter Kohn.

SOMETIMES "man's best friend" is more than just friendly – a dog can be a valuable support animal for elderly people and especially those with dementia.

When South African-born Kevin Picker, who has a background in finance and IT, was looking for a way to help his young son Eran achieve his potential, he discovered the wonderful world of service canines.

For Eran, who is autistic, being bonded with a service dog changed his life – but it also provided a new business opportunity for Kevin to assist others. Kevin partnered with Yariv Ben Yosef, an Israeli dog trainer who was an early adopter of cutting-edge service-dog programs to deliver animal-assisted therapy for people with disabilities.

One of the special training programs Yariv has perfected – together with renowned Israeli geriatrician Daphna Golan Shemesh – is that used for bonding dogs with people who have dementia, including those with early stages of Alzheimer's.

Yariv has brought the program to Australia, where he is implementing it together with Kevin at the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia (CSTDA), located in Caulfield.

Kevin and Yariv head a team of seven therapists, with numerous Australian clients on their books, including several dementia sufferers.

Kevin explains that the ideal applicants for their dog program are people with early stages of dementia, who are able to develop and bond with a canine friend during the two-year training and integration process.

The protocol for training both dogs and their human pals is quite specific and follows an internationally recognised and copyrighted 300-point plan.

It seems those Lassie stories had the right idea – the dogs most suited as an

Alzheimer's Aid Dog are smooth collies, as they are super sensitive, friendly, easily trained and the short-haired breed of collie can be easily cared for, says Kevin.

From whelping onwards, the collies are trained to feel at home in a variety of places dogs might not usually find themselves in – including shops, restaurants and community centres.

Unlike conventional dog training, the animals are trained not to respond to commands, but to the situation and overall body language of their handlers, explains Kevin.

"Dogs are trained to perceive any sign of their handler's possible disorientation, anxiety or stress."

Kevin Picker, CSTDA

"It's important that the dogs are trained to perceive any sign of their handler's possible disorientation, anxiety or stress. They are trained to react to that by alerting and re-grounding their handler and guiding them back to the last place of safety, such as their home," he says.

For the first year of training, the human works with a therapy dog from the centre to become accustomed to managing a service dog. In the second year, they are introduced to their very own service dog who will become their lifelong companion.

"Elderly people with dogs derive many benefits," notes Kevin. "Dogs are a focal point and make people with dementia seem less daunting to those around them, particularly young children such as grandkids."

Anti-discrimination laws in Australia



A CSTDA client with his service canine.

Photo: CSTDA

ensure that almost all public places are service-dog friendly, and that includes venues where you might not normally expect to find an animal, such as synagogues, community centres, libraries, food stores and restaurants.

"It gives the dementia sufferer mobility, independence and, because they need to keep a service and feeding routine for the animal, a sense of continuity, and, importantly, a reason to go out of the house," Kevin adds.

"And a dog will never judge his owner."

Contact Kevin Picker at the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia, 0458 458 541; info@cstda.com.au



Service dogs become a lifelong companion.