

SPOTLIGHT ON SERVICE ANIMALS

Turning to your best friend

For people suffering from a variety of disorders, having a specially trained canine helper can make a huge difference to their quality of life. Peter Kohn speaks with Kevin Picker, an expert in providing service dogs.

WHAT if a person suffering with uncontrolled seizures or another medical event is able to be alerted prior to the onset of such a seizure or event? Specially trained canines can alert them to move into a safe environment with a nudge, or alert a remote support team.

Or what happens when a person begins to feel anxiety? The dog could sit on them, literally "grounding" them until the attack subsides. Or what if someone with autism or Alzheimer's is about to cross a busy street, unaware of the danger of cars? A therapy dog can push them back, even if it detects the imminent peril from many metres away.

People with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) might fear night terrors so much that they will reduce their sleep hours to unhealthy levels. But what if a service dog by their side could sense they were about to have a nightmare and gently prod them awake?

"We don't use the word 'disability'. We just want to see people empowered."

Kevin Picker
Service canine expert

Specially trained canines can sense certain movements, or even a change in body smell as the sleeping person begins to perspire under the stress of an impending night terror and can become their 3am saviour.

It's no fantasy, says Kevin Picker, head of the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia (CSTDA). Therapy dogs can pick up signals far too subtle for humans to detect, and can intervene to help. And they can be

there 24 hours a day, truly delivering on their reputation as a human's best friend and giving people the independence they need.

At Melbourne's Bialik College, therapy dogs are teaching children in prep and year one how to make friends, says Picker. "Kids are offered a basket containing gadgets like phones and tablets, but also a simple ball, and they're asked to pick one. They learn that by selecting the ball and playing a ball game with one of our dogs, they're making a friend. In an era when their parents are spending a lot of time on social media, the simple art of making real face-to-face friends is being lost, and playing with a dog teaches young children the skill to make friends."

Picker's not-for-profit, "for-benefits" enterprise, Dogs For Life, is the public brand of CSTDA, which helps thousands of people around Australia, including many in the Jewish community, to lead better lives.

Born in South Africa, Melbourne-based Picker worked in finance and IT, but a life-changing event intervened. He wanted to help his young autistic son Eran achieve his potential, and in the process discovered the enormous potential of service canines.

For Eran, being bonded with a service dog changed his life - and provided an opportunity for Kevin to assist others. Kevin joined forces with Israeli dog trainer Yariv Ben Yosef, an early adopter of service-dog programs, who collaborated with acclaimed Israeli geriatrician Daphna Golan Shemesh to deliver animal assisted therapy for people of all ages, including those suffering with dementia and Alzheimer's.

Describing Ben Yosef as "the original dog whisperer", Kevin has taken the Israeli's principles and developed a world-leading therapy dog program which is now being implemented around Australia, and in Israel.



Eran Picker relaxes with his service dog.

Kevin emphasises that service dogs are quite distinct from dogs trained to assist people with physical challenges, such as sight and hearing impairments. They are not command-driven animals, but are trained to act on their own initiative by sensing when their human is in trouble.

"We don't use the word 'disability'. We just want to see people empowered," emphasises Kevin.

Dogs selected from breeders are mainly labradors and lagottos, but can also be other breeds, such as poodles, smooth collies, schnauzers and King Charles spaniels. Dogs For Life has first pick of the litter from a wide range of breeders. At 12-13 weeks, the pups are separated from their litter and placed with foster families to be socialised, with a trainer visiting the dog in its family home for one or two hours each day.

At around 12-15 months, the dogs are mature enough to be taken from their foster family and trained as service canines, while at the same time, allied medical professionals and TAFE-trained therapists - including specialists in animal assisted psychotherapy - are working with the dog's intended human,

assessing and preparing them for their sometimes lifelong bond with a dog specially selected for its temperament to match that person's needs. Human and canine then begin bonding under the guidance of a therapist.

All steps in the 300-point process are carefully documented in a constant effort to fine-tune the training of more than 200 Australian canines in the program. It has received the encouragement of Veterans Affairs Minister Darren Chester, with a multi-million dollar federal government trial based on research into PTSD at La Trobe University.

Service dogs are now a recognised part of modern living and Australian Jewish community centres and synagogues are increasingly welcoming humans with their canine service pals.

For Kevin, the journey has been an intensely personal one. His son Eran now runs an online bookstore, Nanny's Web, and leads a rich, purposeful life. "He's empowered, which is what this is all about."

For further information, contact Kevin Picker on 0458 458 541 or visit cstda.com.au