

A ray of sunshine for struggling teens

He was once a terrified, homeless puppy, but now Vader is helping to rebuild the lives of youngsters locked out of mainstream education due to learning disabilities and mental health issues.

An unwanted puppy rehomed by Blue Cross is helping to turn around the fortunes of troubled youngsters through his remarkable work as a school support dog.

Vader was rescued with his siblings in Ireland and soon found himself in the care of our Bromsgrove rehoming team, which worked hard to instil in the young dog the vital socialisation he had missed out on due to his poor start to life.

And it wasn't long before he found a home with Tracey Berridge, the founder of charity Dogs Helping Kids (DHK), and her husband Mark, near Barnstaple in Devon.

The couple – heartbroken following the loss of their beloved pet and original DHK school dog, Laya – saw Vader's profile on the Blue Cross website and soon made the six-hour round trip to visit him at the West Midlands centre.

As she had hoped, Tracey immediately saw the downtrodden pup's potential, despite his sorry start to life.

"I did some clicker training with him to see how receptive he would be to the future training I had planned. He was great; really, really receptive and just did everything beautifully.

"You could just tell that he had such a sweet nature about him – he's a very deep and soulful dog."

And so the decision was made to take him home, and a few days later, Vader started his new life as a much-loved pet and trainee school dog.

Four years on, and after three years of intensive DHK training – the longest of any assistance dog charity in the UK – Vader is working with teenagers with mental health issues, autism, PTSD or major anxieties.

While 95 per cent of DHK's 60-plus dogs grow up and work within schools, Vader is specially trained to help youngsters that are unable to stay in mainstream education.

The four-and-a-half-year-old saluki-greyhound cross, who lives alongside Blue Cross rescue cat Druid, also helps Tracey with the training of new DHK dogs, attends charity meetings and even has a regular column called Vader's Tails in his local newspaper.

"It was a rollercoaster journey, and we have had our ups and downs. He came to us at 16 weeks; no puppy should be in rescue for that long. He was undersocialised and didn't have any concept of what a house was. There was just so much about him that was challenging, and he was scared of so much; there were certain things he was petrified of. It was hard work, but he is now an awesome dog."





Teenagers that work with Vader learn all about dog welfare and training, which includes mastering impressive tasks such as commanding him to ring bells and even read from prompt cards. Incredibly, Tracey explained that dogs have the ability to learn and understand up to 100 words with the right training, and Vader is well on his way.



Vader will also nestle his head in the youngsters' laps to provide support and encouragement while they read.

"Due to his very quiet, calm, very quirky, but incredibly sensitive nature, he is very suited to this role," said Tracey, who started the charity as a teenager more than 30 years ago.

One of the teens that Vader helps is Harry, and the impact of their sessions on his life has been huge.

How Vader has “magically unlocked” Harry’s world

In a desperate search for the thing that would “magically unlock” the world for her autistic son, Harry’s mum, Heather Parks, came across the DHK website and immediately got in touch with Tracey.

Harry had been unable to go into a classroom for five months prior to that and had refused to engage in anything remotely educational, leaving him “isolated and losing confidence fast”.

But Heather had seen a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel when the family got a dog called Maisie, who Harry formed an instant and deep bond with.

Heather said: “He researched endlessly, watched training videos and pretty much took over the whole puppy care responsibility. I noticed that Harry seemed to have an incredible empathy with Maisie, understanding her needs and having amazing insight into her behaviour. I felt that we had

discovered something special and that we needed to somehow tap into this to help Harry, who was finding all aspects of life difficult, particularly school.”

Heather was keen to get Harry a therapy dog to support him through his difficulties, but soon realised it would be a long and expensive road, which is what led her to reach out to Tracey.

Harry has been working with Vader since March 2017 and visits the DHK headquarters, underneath Tracey and Mark’s home, once a week to learn about all aspects of dog ownership.

The sessions have become the undeniable “highlight” of his week, and have given him the drive and enthusiasm to learn again – with the goal of achieving a career working with animals.

And, having shown such talent and promise during the workshops, Harry will soon be getting a support dog of his own, who Tracey and Vader will help him to train.

“DHK has not only given him [Harry] huge enjoyment and an increase in self-confidence; DHK has also begun a subtle, but very real re-engagement with education,” said Heather.

“Inspired by Tracey’s impressive academic qualifications, Harry has begun to contemplate what education he would need in the future to study animal behaviour at university.

“And one day, in his excitement to share the information in a dog breed book Tracey had given him, he completely forgot that he doesn’t read anymore, and read to me the whole 50-minute journey home! And, for Tracey, he has even done ‘homework’ tasks, the only academic work he has agreed to do for over a year.

“These moments have signified huge mindset changes for Harry. For me, they are evidence that I have found the ‘magic’ to unlocking Harry’s world.”



Vader with Harry holding his dog training certificate.





“ He’s incredible, and shows that rescue dogs make the best dogs and can help to change lives forever. ”

An impact beyond measure

Vader has changed the lives of many more teenagers and has even helped to bring one, who had attempted to take her own life twice, back from the brink of suicide.

And while he’s not in work mode, Vader is to Tracey and Mark, quite simply, the perfect pet, and he has helped to mend their broken hearts following the loss of Laya.

Most days the trio can be found walking along the beach near their home, with Vader zooming around playing fetch.

The couple, as well as Blue Cross, couldn’t be prouder of him.

Tracey said: “Vader is such a total sweetie and I honestly couldn’t be any more proud of how far he has come with both his training and his behaviour and everything he has achieved for the charity.

“He has surpassed all expectations and has touched the hearts of all the teenagers he works with and everyone he meets.

“You can’t even put it into words the difference that he makes, because it is something that we as people can’t do; he connects with the teenagers on a level that no human can. They’re willing to talk and do things that they wouldn’t if Vader wasn’t there. He has this amazing ability to get them to achieve and open up in ways they wouldn’t be able to otherwise.

“He’s incredible, and shows that rescue dogs make the best dogs and can help to change lives forever.”

Caroline Oram, Animal Welfare Assistant at Bromsgrove, said: “The whole team is just so thrilled at the success of Vader and the

brilliant work he is doing to help so many children. We are so proud of him and grateful to Tracey and Mark for all the work they have put into making him such an awesome dog. We are so happy for them.”



Watch Vader in action at bluecross.org.uk/vader