

# MOB rules!

**Andrea McHugh** meets a remarkable teenager who is determined to change the face of modern dog training.



**T**here is nothing more devastating for a parent than seeing their child suffer. But for mum Rachael Landymore the situation was absolutely desperate, when in September 2012 her teenage son Liam became so depressed that he no longer wanted to leave the house or even be alive.

Thankfully, fast-forward three years and it's hard to recognise the confident and happy young man that Liam has grown into. Nowadays the 16-year-old's life is filled with purpose and he can't wait for each day to start. And the reason for this dramatic transformation? Quite simply, it is entirely down to a rather special three-year-old cross-breed called Charlie.

"Charlie is an amazing dog," said Rachael. "He's the very first trainee support school dog with a charity called Dogs Helping Kids (DHK) which trains and assesses dogs to work in schools, colleges, and libraries, to help vulnerable children.

Charlie is a unique DHK dog, because he actually lives with us and helps Liam. Liam is totally involved in his training and this has been so successful that he now acts as a teenage adviser for the charity.

## CONFIDENCE BOOSTER

"Charlie completely changed Liam's life for the better, and I can't believe how much his confidence and self-esteem have increased. Charlie has also awoken a new passion in Liam who wants to become a dog trainer and is determined to do everything possible to encourage more men to embrace positive, kind, training methods. This is why he formed Liam's MOB, which stands for Men on Board and is an extension of DHK."

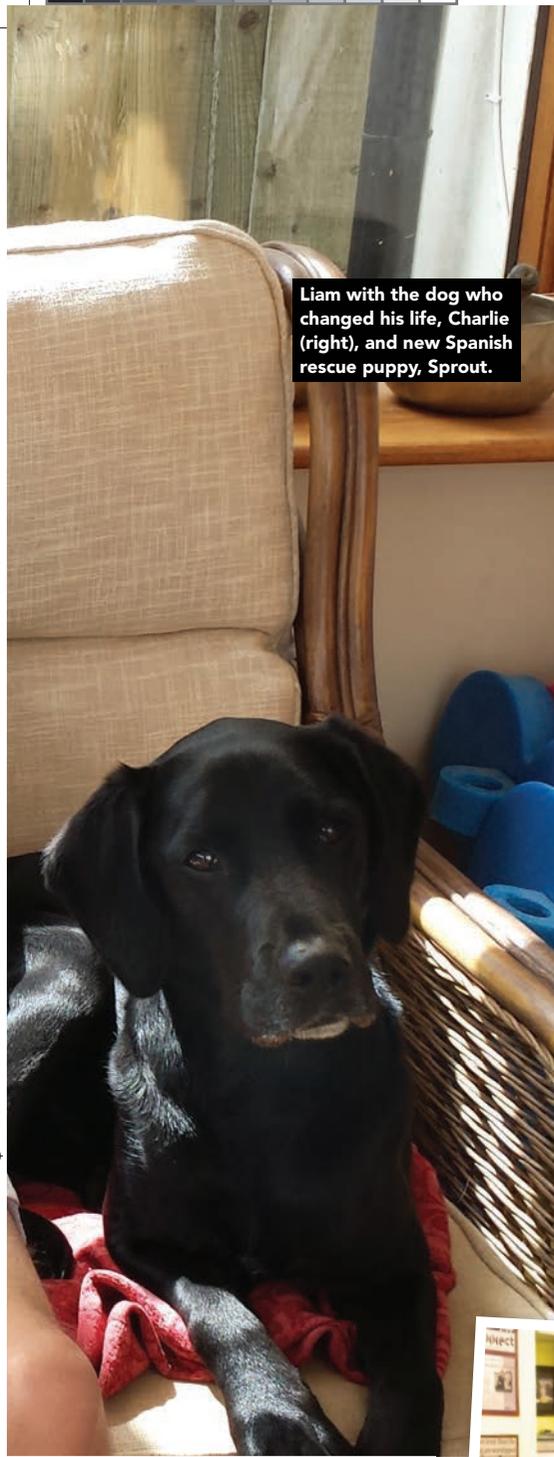
Liam's story began when he was seven years old and suffered a traumatic event that resulted in post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite a plethora of therapies to try to help him, nothing worked and

his condition gradually worsened as he suffered debilitating depression, anxiety, and agoraphobia.

"Liam got to the stage where he didn't want to get out of bed and never left the house," recalled Rachael. "He got so low that it was absolutely horrendous, because my husband Mark, and my two other children, just didn't know how to help him. Liam told us that he just couldn't put his brave face on any more and made two suicide attempts. I was terrified that we might lose him."

And then fate intervened. The family had two dogs at the time — an eight-year-old Lab X Springer called Fly, and a 16-year-old Springer called Fletch. When Fletch died, poor Fly was utterly miserable and spent all his time looking for his old friend.

"We decided to get a puppy to help Fly," said Rachael. "When I found a puppy with the same breed combination



Liam with the dog who changed his life, Charlie (right), and new Spanish rescue puppy, Sprout.

Pic: North Devon Journal.

became the first DHK trainee support school dog to work one-to-one with a vulnerable child and this proved to be a real turning point in Liam's life. Wherever Liam goes, Charlies goes and the difference he has made is unbelievable."

Liam said: "Charlie is great and I am living proof of what a positive effect a dog can have on you. The bond that develops with a dog is amazing and helps physically and emotionally. Even when I was feeling very low I knew that I had to get out of the house and go for a walk or throw the ball for Charlie. It made me put my feelings to one side because I was responsible for his welfare and training. In the beginning I wasn't too keen about going to weekly training sessions, but as soon I got there I loved it and you couldn't keep me away. I loved seeing how much Charlie was progressing and how happy he was during training."

### SOCIALISING CHARLIE

Liam taught Charlie all the basics of training, such as sit, down, and stay, but as a trainee DHK support school dog he also had to learn other skills and cope with being out and about in a variety of situations. Liam gradually overcame his fears and began to venture further afield to socialise Charlie and introduce him to different people.

"Charlie can do all kinds of tricks," said Liam. "They have all been achieved



Charlie practises 'the snuggle'.

through clicker training and as he is very toy motivated we use toys as a reward. His favourite trick is probably 'the beg' which he offers all the time, but I think he can do about 25 tricks in total, such as down, sit, bow, play dead, and ride on a skateboard. He can also read flash cards, which is really useful for helping children with dyslexia, as the dog learns to sit down with a child and focus on the book while they are reading, which encourages them to give it a try.

"One of the most important things that Charlie learned is 'the snuggle', where he rests his head on your knee. This is great for a child who is feeling anxious, as they can stroke him and it's very calming. I taught him to do this on cue, but now Charlie is so in tune with me he senses when I need it and just comes and does it.

"I would describe Charlie's personality as a bit wacky and there are a lot of different sides to him. He loves his work and is quite serious about it, but as soon as work stops he goes mad running after his tennis ball, having fun, and letting off steam."

Liam began to attend many different training courses, which brought him into contact with Tellington TTouch instructor Sarah Fisher, and Nando Brown, head trainer from In the Doghouse and a member of the Institute of Modern Dog Trainers (IMDT). However, Liam soon began to notice that he was often the only male on the courses.

"Last November I was talking to Sarah Fisher, who is a patron of DHK, and she mentioned that according to NHS statistics more men are bitten by dogs than anyone else," said Liam. "We started to discuss what could be done to stop this and then I wondered how we could encourage more men to clicker train

as Fly it just seemed like it was meant to be. Getting Charlie turned out to be the best thing we ever did.

"Charlie helped us all to get over our grief at losing Fletch, and we took him to Puppy Gurus, a training school in Bideford. The owner, Tracey Berridge, thought Charlie was so quick to learn that he had the potential to become a support school dog for her charity DHK. We decided that when he was a bit older Charlie could start training for this.

"Shortly afterwards Liam hit rock bottom and made two suicide attempts and the next time I saw Tracey I burst into floods of tears. I was really frightened. Tracey had a think about it and decided that we should bring Charlie's training forward and get Liam involved. Charlie



Liam with Charlie and DHK founder Tracey Berridge.

**"Nowadays the 16-year-old's life is filled with purpose and he can't wait for each day to start."**



**"Charlie is great and I am living proof of what a positive effect a dog can have on you."**

**The bond between these two is amazing.**

dogs, rather than using old-fashioned, dominant techniques. I'd already noticed that you rarely see men at training classes, and I decided to do something to get more men involved and learn to have fun with their dogs using kindness and positive training.

"I started Liam's MOB and things began moving very quickly. I met lots of people who wanted to be a part of it. Sarah Fisher and her partner, the actor Anthony Head, are heavily involved, as is Nando Brown and Steve Mann from IMDT. I also met the trainer Jordan Shelley, who is incredibly supportive and I get on so well with him that I often call him my big brother! I never imagined that I would meet and work with all these people. It's just amazing.

"Charlie has changed my life drastically. I went from being so low that I didn't want to be here, to someone who can't wait for the next day to come and the next training session to start. I'm working with some of the top trainers in the world, I've been on TV, and I'm going to talk at a conference with Victoria Stilwell. One day I will write a book — it's hard to believe how much my life has changed!"

## Three peaks challenge

Liam is so grateful to Charlie and DHK that he has organised a gruelling challenge to raise money to train more dogs. "I've seen for myself the fantastic work that these support school dogs do," he said. "For example, I know of dogs who have gone into schools and helped abused children to speak when they haven't spoken for a year. There are now about 40 dogs nationally, but more are needed, so I have got a team of people together to raise money for DHK by trekking The Three Peaks from August 8 – 10, starting with Ben Nevis, Scafell, and finally Snowdon.

"I'm really looking forward to it and hope to raise lots of money and awareness. If anyone would like to donate please visit <https://www.givey.com/3peaksdogshelpingkids> and if anyone would like to join Liam's MOB, please visit my website or Facebook page — you will be very welcome!"

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or Dogs Helping Kids:  
[www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk](http://www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk)