

“When a child smiles at his dog for the first time... that’s priceless”

With a staggering 250,000-hours volunteering under its belt, the work of a local charity has been recognised with a Queen’s Award for Voluntary Services. Local Women caught up with Assistance Dogs NI’s CEO Geraldine McGaughey from Limavady to learn how their services transform the lives of kids with autism and wheelchair users.

By Mandi Millar

Geraldine McGaughey has a ‘tail’ to tell... 45 of them in fact... and they’re all barking!

For the organisation she helped found in the kitchen of her Limavady home in 2011, has just won a Queen’s Award for Voluntary Services, the charity sector’s MBE.

From the spark of an idea on a wet weekend, Geraldine was instrumental in launching Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland which today is transforming the lives of people affected by autism and wheelchair users.

“With 29 dogs working dogs and another 16 in training, ADNI is giving 43 families the chance of a brighter future, when before all they faced was mounting despair and growing isolation,” says Geraldine who’d never even heard of assistance dogs until that rainy day in Donegal.

“We were on holidays in 2006, and the weather was grim – added to that we could only get one channel on the TV! I ended up looking at that though I wasn’t paying much attention until a piece came on about assistance dogs helping children with autism in the Republic.

“My background’s in social work and I was working with kids who have autism and gathering as much information as possible about what was available in Northern Ireland.

“Anyway I came home and made enquiries only to discover that although assistance dogs were used in England and the Republic, we had none in Northern Ireland.

“I was still working full-time so I didn’t really have the time to do much about that, though I was liaising with Disability Action and Autism NI who were interested in the potential of such a scheme here.”

In 2010, however, Geraldine got a call from the latter to say there was now enough interest to at least form a committee and seriously investigate an assistance dog programme locally and the charity was formally constituted the following year.

It takes £5,000 to get a dog to the point where it can be placed with a family after having been fostered and trained by our volunteers for 18 months.



Geraldine and the latest recruit Joy

Initially juggling her job with ADNI commitments, Geraldine never lost sight of the kids whose lives the charity could transform.

“My drive then – and now – comes from the fact that autism is such a misunderstood condition. For a, start it’s invisible, so no allowances are made,” she explains.

“Autism is a condition which affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people and the world around them. I was meeting families isolated because of it – the children with autism as well as their parents, siblings and the wider family.

“The kids were struggling with all the ordinary things, like going shopping, to the cinema, getting their hair cut - deprived of all the things we take for granted because of the all-consuming anxiety that autism brings. They were in dire straits

“For someone with autism, their first language is visual – ours is verbal so these kids are desperately trying to make sense of a ‘foreign’ language all the time. You only have to think of all the metaphors and idioms we use every day to get a sense of it.

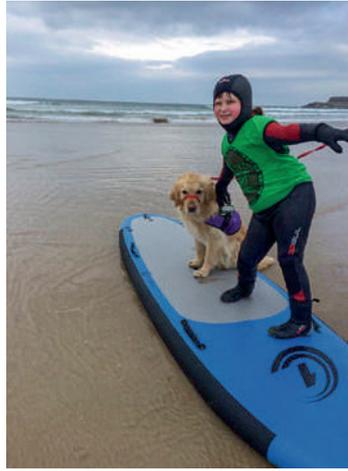
“I remember one day listing all the ones I use – and it blew my mind. You see, there’s another one!” laughs Geraldine who was finally able to focus her efforts on ADNI when the charity secured almost £750,000 support from the Big Lottery Fund.



Connie the assistance dog



Daniel and Ebony



Darcy

Now, as CEO, supported by two full-time staff and an army of volunteers, she had ADNI up and running –but the hard work was just starting.

“It takes £5,000 to get a dog to the point where it can be placed with a family after having been fostered and trained by our volunteers for 18 months and you can get absorbed in the financial side of things when you’re juggling figures,” admits Geraldine, who didn’t realise how utterly life-changing these dogs would be until she saw Honey with Rebecca.

“Honey was one of our first ‘graduates’ but when I first met Rebecca

she was hiding behind her mum with her hand over her face. She had a history too of hurting herself. Now that wee girl has a better social life than me - she’s even winning Irish dancing trophies! And it’s all down to Honey who’s changed not only her life, but her wider family’s too.

“Another family told me about Ebony and their child Daniel. One night Ebony woke them. When they went to check on Daniel, they discovered him in real distress because of an ear infection. Ebony hadn’t been trained to do that – she just knew to do it,” says Geraldine who never ceases to marvel at the uncanny relationship the kids form with their assistance dogs.

“Similarly, Rebecca’s dog Honey got to know she had a thing about wind turbines and the fact they had to be turning. Her mum started to realise though that every time they were getting ready to go out and the turbines weren’t turning, Honey would bark. It meant her mum could prepare Rebecca and avoid her becoming stressed. Again Honey was never taught to do that – she just knew it’s what Rebecca needed.”

Indeed, such has been the impact of the animals in the families’ lives that a couple have even undertaken to foster and train a dog so another family can benefit like them.

“That’s a unique opportunity because it means the dog, from its earliest months, is already working with someone who has autism,” explains Geraldine.

“Garnet, for instance, is a dog in training with a family whose wee boy has autism. The dog was never taught about deep pressure ie lying partially over the child to calm them when they’re stressed but he just seemed to know that’s what he needed.

“Again that’s something Garnet probably wouldn’t have picked up had she not been trained with a child who has autism so it’s such a bonus when families already using assistance dogs undertake to train another one to graduation.”

However, although they’re carefully sourced from Kennel Club breeders for their calm temperaments, not all the dogs manage to graduate.

“But even if they don’t, we always look for alternative careers! Connie, for instance, had hip dysplasia,” recalls Geraldine.

“I’d worked previously with victims of sexual assault and rape and I knew that in America there are court assistance dogs which are trained to help children giving harrowing evidence as young witnesses.

“I approached the NI Court Service and the NSPCC, which run a Young Witness Programme, and ultimately Connie became Europe’s first court dog! Judges are actually booking her in advance now and we have had convictions that just wouldn’t have happened if she hadn’t been there to support the young person.”

Another assistance dog, Darcy, lives with the CEO of the NI Children’s Hospice, comes to work with her every day and travels between the adult and children’s hospices where she’s become the first resident hospice dog.

Despite the success though, Geraldine always has to think ahead.

“We know the Big Lottery funding will run out so we’re always looking towards sustainability. We have a social enterprise shop already in Limavady and we hope to have two more in other towns soon.

“It takes £150,000 a year to keep going and we have a waiting list of families desperate for an assistance dog so the demand is always there,” says Geraldine who was delighted when the phenomenal 250,000 hours of volunteering clocked up by her team was recognised by their Queen’s Award.

“When we were being interviewed for the award we were asked what our biggest success story has been. Every story is our biggest success - when a mum tells you her wee boy smiled for the first time when he met his dog, that’s priceless,” says Geraldine.

“What these dogs bring to their families goes far beyond anything we ever expected. The relationships they build with the children go way beyond anything they’re trained to do. It’s almost intuitive, magical. After all dog spelled backwards is God. Our dogs are truly changing lives.”

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