

Meet the dogs who are changing the lives of children and their families...

# Waggy tail heroes



Lewis, Clare and Codie

Best buddies

Lewis with Codie

## 'Lewis's furry friend makes life less ruff'

My son Lewis's friends ran around our garden at full speed, but he struggled to keep up.

'Mum, I'm tired,' he said.

He couldn't run as fast as the other children and though he was three years old, he struggled to climb the stairs.

I took him to the doctor.

'I'm worried there's something wrong with his feet,' I said.

Lewis was referred to the hospital for tests and after turning four he was diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a life-limiting illness that meant his muscles were slowly wasting away.

I cried and wondered how we'd cope.

As he grew, Lewis couldn't keep

pace with the other children.

The more mobility he lost, the more isolated and lonely he became.

But through the charity Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland I found Lewis a new friend.

As soon as we took Codie — a golden Labrador — home, I knew he was a perfect match for Lewis.

They curled up together on the sofa to watch cartoons and films about dogs.

Codie accompanied us on our regular trips from Tyrone to the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, where Lewis took part in a special drug trial.

On our first trip with Codie, I

smiled at the air hostess as she checked our seat belts were fastened.

'And what about this chap?' she asked, as she looked down at Codie, asleep in the space in front of our seats.

'He's fine,' I said. 'He had a drink in the departure lounge and he's trained not to do his business in public.'

Dogs weren't normally allowed on aeroplanes. But Codie was much more than a pet and an exception was made.

Nothing fazed him.

As the plane barrelled down the runway and climbed into the sky, he didn't bat an eyelid.

Lewis, 11, now needs a wheelchair to help him get around. It's heartbreaking to watch his physical decline.

But it helps to see him with such a good, reliable buddy by his side.

Lewis shouts 'fetch' and Codie brings him the TV remote.

I benefit from having Codie around too. I take him for long walks while Lewis rests and it gives me time for some much-needed headspace.

Codie is part of the family now. *From Clare McShane, 44, of Strabane, Co Tyrone*

## 'And what about this chap?'

## 'She keeps my daughter safe'

As balloons burst and party poppers exploded, the other children ran around and screamed in delight.

But my little girl threw herself to the floor and covered her ears with her hands.

'Mummy, help!' she said.

I lifted her off the floor, made my excuses and left the party.

Rebecca had been diagnosed with Asperger's at the age of four and noisy social situations were often too overwhelming for her.

She was bright as a button and loved arts and crafts. But the big wide world terrified her.

Desperate to help, I searched

online and came across an assistance dogs charity.

'We've got nothing to lose,' I told my husband Adam, as I filled out an application form.

We were successful and 18 months later Honey, a golden retriever, bounded into our lives.

Rebecca adored her new pet and they quickly became inseparable.

In time, we watched Rebecca's confidence grow.

The world no longer seemed so frightening and she plucked up the courage to join a performing arts school.

'Honey is my best friend,' Rebecca said.

One day, we were out for a walk when a gust of wind lifted

her head and sent it spinning into a stream of speeding traffic.

Without a thought, Rebecca pulled away from my hand and took off towards the busy road to retrieve it.

'No,' I screamed. 'Stop!'

Then Honey came to the rescue. Rebecca wore a backpack attached by a lead to Honey's harness.

So all Honey had to do was sit and her weight grounded Rebecca to the spot before she was at risk of being hit by a car.

I crouched down beside Honey and stroked her.

'Good girl!' I said. Aside from one squashed hat, the crisis was averted.

But Honey isn't just a hero, she's Rebecca's therapist, nanny and best friend too.

Recently for World Book Day, Rebecca, 10, dressed up as Alice in Wonderland and Honey was transformed into her White Rabbit.

On a recent kids' day cruise, Rebecca gave a solo performance of *Let It Go*.

With Honey sitting on stage by her side, Rebecca had the confidence to wow the crowd. I felt so proud.

Honey has enriched my daughter's life in so many ways. I can't imagine what Rebecca's life would be like without her. *From Michelle Barker, 38, of Ballymena, Co Antrim*



Honey and Rebecca



Michelle and Rebecca



Together

such a state I had to abandon my trolley and leave the store.

Henry was autistic and shopping wasn't the only social situation that caused him stress.

Family days out were impossible. My husband Warren would have to take Henry's younger twin siblings, Emily and Christopher, to the park or the beach while I found a quieter activity to keep Henry amused.

Henry didn't like physical contact so taking him for a haircut was hard. He'd suffer an anxiety attack before he even reached the hairdresser's chair.

I tried to cut his hair myself.

But it took an hour to give him a slight trim and tears streamed down his face throughout.

'I feel like I'm torturing him,' I told Warren.

Then when Henry was 10 years old, he was introduced to an assistance dog named Costa.

As time passed, they grew close. Henry felt so much more at ease around Costa.

I'd catch them having a snooze

together on the beanbag in front of the TV.

One day, I took Henry back to the supermarket and he was like a different child.

Instead of shouting and crying his way around the aisle, he quietly pushed the trolley with Costa trotting alongside him.

I saw how calm Costa made Henry feel and it gave me an idea.

Back home, I tied a hairdresser's gown around Costa's neck.

'Good dog,' I said, producing a pair of scissors.

I turned to Henry, sitting beside us at the kitchen table.

'See?' I said. 'Costa's happy to have his hair cut, aren't you, boy?'

I pretended to trim the black hairs around our Labrador's ears as he wagged his tail from beneath the gown.

'There you go,' I said, dusting Costa down. 'Now your turn, Henry.'

Henry looked a little doubtful. But he didn't make a fuss when I tied the gown around his neck.

He sat still as I began to snip. Within minutes his hair was trimmed with no fuss.

Costa is named after the coffee chain that sponsors him and we are now regulars at our local branch.

Staff even keep a special water bowl aside for when he visits.

Henry, 12, used to avoid talking to strangers. But Costa gives him something to talk about.

He tells people: 'You can pat him if you like. He likes to have his ears stroked.'

Costa is Henry's best friend. But he's a special gift to all our family. *From Barbara Smyth, 41, of Castlerock, Londonderry*



Shopping together

For further information on Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland, visit [adni.org.uk](http://adni.org.uk)