



## CHANGING LIVES

I was cooking tea in the kitchen, my son was with me doing his homework and my middle daughter, Tanwen, was sat chatting when the hall door flew open and Carrie, my elder daughter Rowan's assistance dog, ran in, clearly fretting and 'telling' us something. It was really clear we needed to follow and all of us ran after her. We found Rowan deeply unconscious, choking, in a puddle of vomit, and were able to get Rowan into the recovery position and call an ambulance. At this point Carrie was barely trained, too young to have this as a skill, but this was the first of many times that she has got help for Rowan and potentially saved her life.



My eldest daughter Rowan is very physically disabled. She has a unique genetic disease which gives her a movement disorder, brain damage and failure of much of her autonomic system. She has a lot of medical intervention, tubes and syringes. She is also a really fiercely independent and capable young lady of 22 who has ridden for Great Britain at Para Dressage, coaches RDA vaulting and wants to get on with her life.



As her parents we were stuck as to how to give her most freedom, particularly as she often loses consciousness for quite a long time with no warning at all. She wanted to be able to live her own life and have the least supervision.

I can't remember how the idea came up but we found ourselves sat talking to Ann Whitby (who lives up the hill from us) about assistance dogs and how one could work for her. Ann wasn't breeding that year but she highly recommended Lucy Jenkins, contact was made and the planning started! Lucy was brilliant. We live miles away, but she kept in contact with us with videos, phone calls, pictures and handled all the suitability tests. We were joined by Carrie. We always joke that her career didn't start very well.... The first day she ran off with Rowan's trousers.

Rowan wanted to train Carrie herself so the bond between them would be cemented, so the hard work began. We worked with some amazing people who have helped make Carrie the talented dog she is, but gosh it was a slog!! As well as training to ride for GB, Rowan spent hours every day training Carrie. She knew she had to get her trained before she deteriorated too much. I was so proud of the pair of them, and also of Rowan's sister, Tanwen, who stepped in to keep the training consistent when Rowan spent long spells in hospital.



Carrie bonded really strongly to Rowan and very quickly became invaluable. She knows how to fetch all Rowan's meds and medical equipment, can help her dress and undress, fetch things Rowan needs, can switch on and off lights, can sort washing and bring it to the washing machine, get help if Rowan is ill, she can open doors and press lift buttons in front of Rowan's wheelchair, so many more things that make such a difference to her everyday life. She enables Rowan to go outside and be independent because she can run home and fetch help if there is a problem.



I think the most impressive thing that she has done is diagnose Rowan with tachycardia! Rowan kept on feeling really sick, then passing out. All the family were having a meal out when this happened. Suddenly for us, but Tanwen noticed that Carrie had been 'fretty' for about five minutes before and she wondered whether Carrie knew whatever was causing it was coming. After that we noticed there was a pattern. Carrie fretted for up to ten minutes before these attacks. Luckily Rowan's consultant is a really clever man and also a big fan of Carrie, so when we turned up to an appointment and had to say 'Our dog says....!', he didn't think we were too weird. He asked us if she licked Rowan and we had to admit that it was the one thing that we couldn't train her out of. He had a



theory that Carrie was actually licking to test hormones and that the cause of her fainting was going to give a hormone signal. He thought about it, then arranged for her to have her heart monitored for a week. When the results came back they proved a tachycardia syndrome as part of her autonomic problems, and the reason why Carrie was able to predict what was happening. He suggested that the licking we were unable to train Carrie out of was her way of looking after and monitoring Rowan. Tanwen, our middle daughter, was such a great help in training Carrie when Rowan had to go into hospital. She worked so hard at a time when she was really struggling. Tanwen is autistic. She is very talented but all her intelligence was being hidden by the difficulties of her autism. She and I were sat having a coffee in a café, doing socialisation training with Carrie, when we talked about how she was able to do that only because she had Carrie with us. It made such a difference to her. If she had a dog with her she was able to do a lot of activities and be sociable, if she didn't she was virtually housebound. I went home with a lightbulb lit above my head ready to talk to my husband.



That evening he and I were on our way out. We stopped at Ann Whitby's to drop some dog food that had been mistakenly delivered to us and talked to her about our idea for Tanwen..... and she told us about the puppies her girl Meg had three days before. It was meant to be!

The following day, Tanwen went up the hill to gaze at the puppies from afar. I can't remember exactly when Gwen and she decided that they were meant for each other but it didn't take long. We have lots of photos of the two of them falling in love with each other. She was 'Gwen' from the start and Gwen decided that Tanwen needed a Gwen. She was right, she really did.

It's so funny, they both got the retrievers they needed. Carrie is welded to Rowan. She is quiet and conscientious in her care, completely focused on checking and monitoring.

Gwen is completely different; she is bombastic and a clown. She has a silly wiggle - bottom greeting, complete with wookie noises and whatever 'thing' she can grab to show..... tea towels, bowls, shoes, whatever. She is the confidence that Tanwen needed, striding next to her and knowing that everyone will love her but eyes just for Tanwen.

Similarly to Carrie, she instinctively knew her job from the start. She was only five months old when she started going to college classes with Tanwen and she was a pro. Tanwen took a blanket for her and she sat perfectly through the whole lesson. She did build up slowly, starting just for days where there was just one class. The only time there was a small problem was the first time she did three classes in a day. She made it through the first two, only to be exhausted by the third. She fell fast asleep on her blanket and snored like a train, making the whole class giggle. Luckily the teacher adored her so Gwen wasn't expelled.



Gwen's skills are very different to Carrie's, but equally life changing. Gwen allowed Tanwen the freedom to go out into the world. She knows when Tanwen needs her to act like a clown, to cheer her up and calm her down. She very quickly learned how to crawl up Tanwen to give her Deep Pressure Therapy. DPT has amazing results for people with autism. It uses warmth and pressure to regulate breathing, balances proprioceptive senses and helps her calm down. Gwen was quickly a pro at it.

The two retrievers are so daft when they are off duty, you would never credit them with the skills and responsibility they have, but on duty they have completely changed the life of our family.

**Elizabeth Von Otter**

