

CANINE PARTNERS

January 2020

Our January talk, by Jim Cook, was a lovely way to start the new year. Chatting before the talk was along the lines of “Well, I know about guide dogs, is it that, do you think?” or “I think they also help deaf people, don’t they?” Well, yes to both, and they do work with Guide dogs and Hearing dogs, as well as Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion, but Canine Partners is an organisation which helps disabled, wheelchair users, in astonishing ways which left most of the audience with open mouths and definitely NOT because we were asleep.

With around 1.2 million wheelchair users in this country it is not surprising that Canine Partners had over 700 enquiries in 2019 and as a result, sadly, have currently had to close their waiting list. We began to understand why when Jim explained the lengthy and detailed training programme, for both volunteers, partners, and, of course, the dogs. Basic things such as; making sure the dog does not need to poo when you are halfway round Sainsbury’s, and more sophisticated training using the dog’s natural instincts to tug and retrieve. (Yes, the most often used dog is the retriever).

Dogs are “recruited” as puppies, either from Canine Partners’ own breeding dogs, or from known donations. Unfortunately rescue puppies can not be used, as it is essential that the dogs’ genetic history is known. There were lots of “oohs” and “aahs” at Jim’s photographs of puppies, and dogs performing the most astonishing feats; operating a cashpoint, paying for goods at the supermarket check-out. Well, yes, they do need a human partner. At present you don’t send the dog off with your shopping list and credit card, but they are there to do those small but essential things that the partner can’t, such as reaching up to the slot in the cashpoint, retrieving a purse from a bag, or taking items from top shelves. Jim had several heart-warming stories of ways in which the dogs really help to enrich the lives of their partners and help them to maintain independence. The dogs are retired when they are too old to continue the partnership, but are sent to good homes, often with a member of the partner’s family.

We learnt that it costs about £20 thousand for each dog’s working lifetime, and it was lovely, but not surprising, to see the bowl on the table overflowing with coins and notes at the end of the talk, from the generous people in the audience who know that it will be going to a very well-deserved cause.

Jean Austin