

Dogs for Good Case Study



Suzanne Townsend and Higgins



Two years ago, 28 year old Suzanne Townsend was stuck in a rut.

Diagnosed with ME (Myalgic Encephalopathy) as a teenager, Suzy's life now revolved around managing her condition. With symptoms including widespread muscle and joint pain, cognitive difficulties and chronic, often severe mental and physical exhaustion, she had become reliant on husband Michael and a team of carers to perform even basic tasks.

"I had no life. My life was organising my life."

As Mum to energetic and mischievous Aeron, 3, the situation was intolerable. Something had to be done that would allow Suzanne to live life rather than survive it.

Thinking they might buy and train a pet dog to help Suzanne become more independent, she and Michael began to do some research. It was then that Suzanne came across Dogs for the Good and made an application. To her surprise, she was soon accepted and only 7 months later, Higgins made his first visit to the Townsend family.

The story of an amazing partnership had begun.

Higgins, a handsome, sleek and shiny Black Labrador had the perfect temperament to meet Suzanne's needs. Steady and easy to settle, Higgins had a calm, sympathetic energy and wouldn't tire her out with demands for attention. A playful friend for Aeron and companion to Michael, Higgins fit like a jigsaw piece into a family who hadn't known what was missing from their puzzle.

Relatives and friends were initially a little sceptical, wondering how a dog could possibly help relieve some of the pressure. A year in and it's plain to see the difference Higgins has made.

Michael now goes out one evening a week, leaving Suzanne and Higgins alone with Aeron. Being able to put her little boy to bed on her own for the first time is something that Suzanne never thought would happen.

"With Higgins' help, I can now be the Mum I've always wanted to be. A proper Mum."

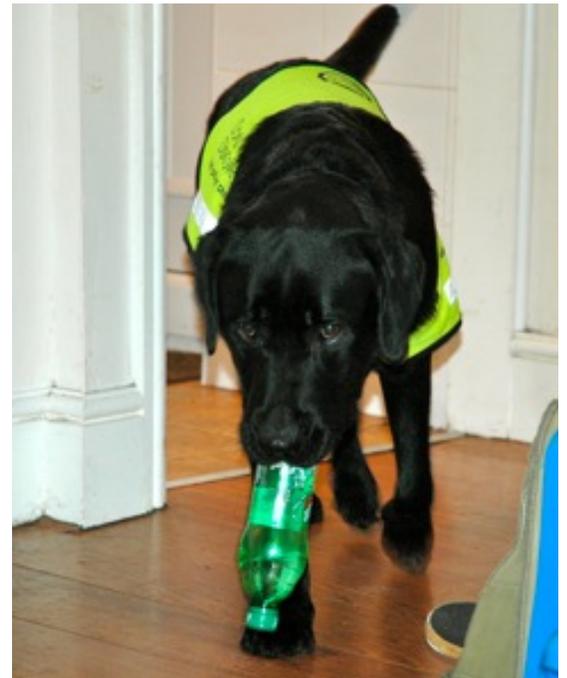
Suzanne can ask Higgins to fetch anything she needs; whether it's her laptop, bottled water, the TV remote or a phone to call for assistance if she needs more help. For someone who previously needed around the clock care, the alone time is a welcome relief.

Higgins has also helped Suzanne be more spontaneous instead of planning everything in advance and with military precision.

Before Higgins, I couldn't ever just nip out to run an errand. I had to fit my activities around other people and have detailed plans how everything would work. It sucked the fun out of everything.

Now, with Higgins by her side, Suzanne can be much more flexible. Higgins opens doors, presses access buttons to shops / lifts, carries or holds items and picks up things she regularly drops (like keys, gloves or her wallet.) Suzy can conserve her precious energy for things she enjoys, rather than having it zapped by these small yet necessary tasks. It also makes a difference that Higgins loves his role, meaning Suzanne never feels guilty about asking him to help - something she struggled with when reliant on Michael.

"You don't want a carer - you want a husband. I have mine back, thanks to Higgins."



Before Higgins arrived, Suzanne had not left the house alone for ten years. Now, when Aeron starts school this year, she and Higgins can do the school run every single day. As an assistance dog, Higgins has legal access to anywhere Suzy needs to take him. This has allowed the family to get out and about so much more; shopping, eating out, using public transport and exploring new places.

Support with the little things that an able bodied person takes for granted can mean the difference between feeling independent and impotent.

"When I had a guest, I used to interrupt Michael and ask him to make them a cup of tea. Now Higgins can pull me up from where I'm sitting using a cord that I hold and can pass me bottled water to fill the kettle. We haven't quite mastered him pouring the teapot yet though"

Higgins is there over the course of a day, helping Suzanne to dress in the morning, fetching the post, passing items between family members, opening and shutting doors and gates - things most people do on autopilot that are often a struggle, if not impossible for Suzanne.

Higgins can also fetch named items for Suzanne, even if she doesn't know where they are. She sends him off to locate and retrieve her medication box, handbag or folder of work. If alone, Suzanne would have to slide off the sofa and struggle across the floor to hunt for what she needed.

"I don't have to be patient anymore, things can happen instantly with Higgins and that means I can get on with my life."

Suzanne's partnership with Higgins has had the greatest impact on her relationship with Aeron. Suzy had begun to worry about the effect of her condition on her bright and lively little boy, desperately wanting him to enjoy his childhood and not have to play a part in her care. Now Suzy can spend time playing with Aeron, putting him to bed and taking him out and about, with her assistance dog doing those tasks she would have struggled with before. Suzanne can take up her role as a Mother without worrying that Aaron is acting as her carer.

Higgins isn't just a dog, he's the fourth member of the Townsend family. Although there is talk of a fifth member joining the ranks now he's arrived. Watch this space!



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