

One by one

Photographer and film director Maria Slough and vet Roger Bralow meet the teenagers who tried to change lives one dog at a time, and the dogs that are changing lives, one child at time...



Photo © Winford Church of England Primary School

completed a three-year training programme and undergoes an annual assessment once certified. We believe that a dog should only be working with a child or teenager, in an educational environment, if it has been trained, assessed and certified to do so.”

“DHK is the only organisation in the country training and assessing dogs purely to work in schools,” Gail Laurence, director of primary education and welfare, tells me while her Labradoodle, Pepsi, a certified support dog, snoozes at her feet. “All of our dogs are incredible and we now have 50 dogs working across 50 schools as educational assistance dogs.”

SCHOOL TIME

Arriving at Winford Church of England Primary School, a ‘Meet the Winford Team’ photo board hangs in the hallway. A smiling chocolate Labrador named Fernie stands out among the rest. The title under his photo reads, ‘School dog’. Moments later, Fernie greets Roger and me, bottom wiggling in true Labrador style. Head teacher Nik Gardner is at the other end of the lead and tells us about the work Fernie is doing in school.

“Fernie has been a certified school dog since May 2016, having attended school as a puppy in training

since early 2014. On a typical day he will engage in at least one activity with children, either a lunchtime walk, reading or training.

“We ensure that he has plenty of downtime, chilling out in my office. Whenever I walk around school or go to meetings, he comes with me, so he has plenty of informal, but adult-assisted contact with children. During this

time, we are modelling what a good relationship with a dog looks and sounds like, with positive words, positive touch, trust, good eye contact.

“Fernie also attends collective worship each day and from time to time, we periodically remind children through interactive assemblies how to be kind around dogs.”

We arrive at the library and meet the student that Fernie is working with today. A cosy corner is scattered with bean bags. She asks Fernie to ‘snuggle’ and he promptly settles on her lap while she starts to read to him. There is something quite magical about

Nestled in the hills above Barnstaple, north Devon, is the headquarters for Dogs Helping Kids.

The charity came into being as a small voluntary educational organisation in 2002, and Princess Laya, a rescue Lurcher, was an integral part of its inception. A certified visiting and educational school dog, she worked alongside the organisation’s founder, Tracey Berridge, and together they visited over 40 schools until Laya’s retirement in 2012.

“Laya was my companion for 14 years and a dog in a million. Dogs Helping Kids is her legacy. She passed away four years ago and I think about her every day as our work continues to grow.”

Now Tracey is supported by Vader, a majestic black and white rescue Lurcher, who qualified as a one-to-one support school dog for teenagers in June 2017.

“Each one of our certified DHK school dogs has

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Photo by Maria Slough

witnessing this process. A beautiful harmony of trust between the species.

As we follow Fernie to his next class, I want to know more about the positive results from having Fernie in school.

“For the targeted work that Fernie is involved in, we have seen great improvement in attendance and the children’s confidence has grown, both in themselves and with animals. The best part is when I see children approach other dogs in the village by walking slowly, asking the owner, then asking the dog with a hand, before stroking in a non-threatening place, like under the chin or the shoulder. When you see this out of school, you know that the messages that you convey in school are really embedded. Fernie, with a little help from me, teaches children all of the values of DHK: non-violence, empathy, respect, kindness, love, responsibility, friendship and trust.”

The bell rings and it is time for Fernie to head home for a run with his best friends, Tango and Willow, two of the three other dogs that form part of Nik’s family with his wife and children. >

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For more information on the work of Dogs Helping Kids, visit www.dogshelpingkids.co.uk



Left to right: Tracey Berridge with Vader, Roger Bralow, and Gail Laurence with Pepsi. Photo by Maria Slough



thing is quality of life for any animal." How do their friends react to this? "Many of our friends are not interested yet. I think this is because they don't really understand it. Our teachers at school were supportive and we wanted to share with our peers how

life changing and positive it is to have a bond with a companion animal.

"The situation is so sad for so many dogs needing a home. We just couldn't stand by and do nothing. Animals are a part of us and the love we have for them will never go away. We see the animals as our friends and despite all the obstacles that we face, it makes us even more determined."

But even such determination could not overcome the heritage that the Bosnian culture breeds and since we met these inspirational youngsters, they have received threats about keeping the dogs in the ruins. Fearing for the dogs, they have found homes for 10 and have made an arrangement with a shelter that Roger visited on the other side of the country.

Now feeling as displaced as the dogs that they were trying to help, the younger boy told me, "I will continue to help stray dogs quietly on my own until the dust settles and one day I will realise my vision for the dogs."

PET LOVERS UNITE

In opposite corners of Europe we had met dogs that were inspiring development in the lives of children, and inspiring teenagers trying to lead by example with their unconditional love for animals.

If the burden of society, tradition and culture will allow children and animals to teach us about love and compassion and kindness without species bias, then the dogs and the youth hold the hope for a more compassionate future.

Teen spirit

Fourteen thousand miles away, birdsong filled the air and remnants of snow lay on the ground as Roger and I and our film crew arrived in a small village on the Bosnian/Croatian border. Crossing over a railway line, we were presented with rows of new houses all uniform in style. Walking down the man-made street, the sound of gravel crunched under our feet.

At the edge of the village, the landscape broke into undisturbed grass plains as far as the eye could see, home only to the concrete ruins of a beautiful building. We had arrived at a small animal sanctuary dedicated to the rescue of unwanted and abandoned dogs.

The sanctuary was the brainchild of two teenage friends and home to 25 dogs. We entered through a secured gate, which opened into a corridor with no roof. Within the only part of the building that is watertight the friends had created inside kennels for the dogs and a small cattery.

The sound of barking filled the air as the dogs greeted their caretakers. Happy tails wagged while one small black dog lay asleep in a tray of food.

"She likes to sleep and eat so we give her a tray," they told us. "For the others, we have constructed dog feeders from new drainpipes to keep their food fresh and off the



animal welfare, I wondered what prompted these teenagers to start rescuing dogs.

"We have always had the vision of creating a shelter in this town, as we saw the number of dogs on the street increase.

"We fundraise for help with food and vet bills and to rehome the dogs.

We visit the homes and make sure they are a good, safe place for our dogs. When a dog arrives, they are quarantined and health checked and treated for any illness. Once the dog is healthy, they join the other dogs. If the funds don't come, we visit local stores and tell them about our dogs and they donate food."

It was the summer of 2017 when the boys decided to create the shelter among the ruins. They have rescued and rehomed 40 dogs in the last nine months. For the homeless dogs in surrounding areas, they built small kennels and placed them in the villages.

The diligence of these two teenagers was evident as they asked Roger about the procedures in larger shelters around the UK.

"What you are doing is absolutely correct," Roger told them. "Getting the dogs health checked and neutered and keeping them fed and safe. The most important

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ground." This creative thinking formed the basis of this extraordinary place.

We wandered through the ruins with several dogs following at our heels. A black cat skipped along beside the dogs. Sitting on an old wooden pallet, they told us about the puppy one of them cuddled in his arms.

"This dog was found abandoned by the railway crossing with his brothers and sisters. We have looked after him for two months and had him checked by a vet. Now we have found him a new home with the family of one of our friends, so he has a happy ending."

Growing up in a country with a shocking history of