

CANINE CARER

'How a labrador changed my life'

Mary George, 41, a single mum from Hebburn, Tyne and Wear, and son Daniel, 12, always knew Yogi was smarter than the average dog...



Daniel with mum, Mary, and Yogi receiving their Crufts award

Our pet dog Yogi came to live with us nearly 17 months ago. We loved Yogi right from the start and he's the best pet anyone could ask for, so we weren't surprised when he won a special award at Crufts.

I have three children, David, 15, Daniel, 12, and Kelsa, nine. Daniel was diagnosed with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD) when he was two. His muscles have deteriorated and he can't walk anymore.

When I found out Daniel's condition was getting worse, the future seemed bleak, but I read about dogs helping disabled people through a US website and I wanted to know if there was a similar service in the UK.

I knew Daniel loved animals. He was very fond of Jim, a tom cat who we'd had a few years before. He was lovely but he used to scratch my knees and dig his claws in to my legs, but he was good as gold when he sat on Daniel's lap. Unfortunately, Jim died a few years ago and I knew the children would like another pet.

We were invited to a special day to meet dogs who could help around the house, run by the charity Dogs For The Disabled. Daniel and Yogi loved each other right away. Daniel stroked Yogi's chocolate coloured coat and Yogi began nuzzling Daniel's hand.

"Aw, he's so sweet," I said, "What do you think, Daniel?" Daniel's eyes lit up, "Can we have him mum, can we please. He's perfect." "We'll have to see what the people at

the kennel say. I really hope we can," I told him. Yogi followed Daniel around for the rest of the afternoon, he wagged his tail faster and faster when Daniel patted him on the head or stroked his back. The workers at Dogs For The Disabled could see how much we loved Yogi and they said that if we got on together for a couple of weeks, we could keep him. "Yes," Daniel laughed. "You're staying with us," he smoothed Yogi's fur and he let out a bark of excitement. Things went really well, I was amazed by what Yogi could do. He didn't enjoy his

Yogi helps Daniel take his socks off, opens doors for him and even pulls his quilt over him'

first night with us though – it was Bonfire Night, and he was scared of the fireworks. But things soon calmed down. Now I don't know what we'd do without Yogi. He helps Daniel take his socks off – he's careful not to pin his feet – he opens doors for him and picks up things he's dropped – such as the TV remote control. These were all things that I used to do for him, but Daniel thinks it's more fun when Yogi does it. Yogi even pulls the quilt over Daniel last thing at night and he's trained to bark if Daniel gets into trouble.

Things hadn't been easy for Daniel, so to see him so happy and content when Yogi was by his side was brilliant. Yogi had been on a training course since he was a six-week-old puppy to prepare for his role. He gives Daniel so much more

independence. Before, it was safer for Daniel to sleep downstairs because of his condition, and he hated it until Yogi came along. Now he sleeps

in the room with him, Daniel feels more secure and comfortable. Yogi was so good, he was nominated for an award by the charity, they come and check up on how things are going along and they said that Yogi was marvellous, even for a helping dog. Then he was put forward for a Kennel Club Friends for Life Trophy to be presented at Crufts. 500 dogs were nominated and just six were going through to the final. One was a dog for the deaf, one was a therapy dog for a woman who was agoraphobic, another was a helping dog for a woman with Asperger syndrome. There was also a dog who saved a woman from a gas leak and one that went missing for a long time and found its own way home. Daniel was the only child in the contest so I felt quite



Yogi has made Daniel's and Mary's lives so much easier



hopeful his story would touch people. We stayed for a few nights plush hotel while Crufts was on and everywhere we went in the Birmingham NEC, people recognised us. They played a video of Daniel and Yogi's story and the other nominees stories, then viewers voted by phone and text for their favourite. It was very tense waiting for the winner to be announced, no one had any idea who it would be – it was up to the public. But then it was announced, "Daniel and Yogi win the Friends for Life award." I couldn't believe it. Daniel burst into tears and so did I, he received a standing ovation, the first time it's ever

happened at Crufts. There wasn't a dry eye in the house and it was so emotional. Daniel and Yogi proudly went to the front and they were presented with the trophy by Matt Baker from *Blue Peter*. Daniel got an iPod nano too – he was over the moon. It was the best feeling in the world, everyone was applauding my boy and Yogi. I was so proud of Daniel and so were Kelsa and David. Afterwards everyone kept coming up to us going, "You're the boy who won the award – congratulations." And Yogi got a lot of attention, too, he was tired out by the end of the day. We'll never forget our time at Crufts, it was wonderful. Even when I hear the music now, I well up. I think Yogi knew something special was going on there, all eyes were on him and Daniel. He's as good as gold and we all love him to bits. He's changed all our lives and we all knew he was a very special dog, but now he's got an award to prove it...

DOGS FOR THE DISABLED

Dogs For The Disabled trains mainly golden retrievers and labradors to carry out practical tasks. Some of the things a dog can be trained to do are:

- Empty the washing machine
- Help remove socks, shoes, coats and jackets
- Undo zips
- Turn on and off light switches
- Fetch the post or morning milk
- Pick up dropped items such as keys, a purse or a pen
- "Speak" or bark on command to alert attention in an emergency
- Help with physiotherapy activities

Assistance Dogs (as these dogs are known) have the right to enter public places such as restaurants, shops and supermarkets. They can also travel on public transport. The charity set up the children's project in 2004 following increasing demand to provide a service to help disabled children. So far, 10 dogs have been trained to help physically disabled children live life to the full. To find out more about the charity Dogs For The Disabled or to help support their work, call 0870 077 6600 or visit the website at www.dogsforthe-disabled.org

HERO HOUND

Daniel suffers from Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, which means he can't walk as his muscles have deteriorated. But now his life has been transformed since Yogi came to live with his family. Daniel loves to play in the garden with Yogi, who can even open doors for him.

