

DOGS FOR THE DISABLED

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WITH HELP FROM THE IRELAND FUNDS, DOGS FOR THE DISABLED IS FILLING A
PREVIOUSLY UNMET NEED IN IRELAND, ONE SPECIALLY-TRAINED WET NOSE AT A TIME.





DOGS FOR THE DISABLED HELPS CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN IRELAND

LEAD LIVES WITH GREATER INDEPENDENCE AND CONFIDENCE.

HERE, DOGS FOR THE DISABLED CO-FOUNDER JENNIFER DOWLER EXPLAINS HOW

THEIR DOGS ARE HELPING INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES TACKLE EVERYDAY TASKS AND

TRANSFORMING LIVES IN THE PROCESS.

Q. How have The Ireland Funds helped Irish Dogs for the Disabled?

A. The Ireland Funds have been huge to our charity. We wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for The Ireland Funds. In those early years we had nothing really. The funding was so critical because when we started there was nothing else coming in. It's been a great relationship.

Most recently, The Ireland Funds have supported our adult programs. This is key because often adults don't attract the same attention as little kids do. Yet there are adults that really need dogs. We recently worked with an adult who fell out of his wheelchair and the dog had been trained to get a blanket, get his pillow, get his phone, and to lie down beside him until the emergency services came.

Q. Jennifer, what motivated you to establish Dogs for the Disabled?

A. I had been with Guide Dogs for the Blind in the UK and Ireland for 12 years and I had come across a number of organizations that trained dogs for people with physical disabilities in the UK. Yet, there was nothing like that in Ireland. So I decided to do it.

Q. What were the early days like?

A. A huge learning curve. Starting, you're quite naive and you really want to help people but I found that I had to learn to put procedures and policies in place so that we could grow. We had to learn how to manage our money and we had to learn how to generate income. These were all new skills I had to develop. Yet slowly as we trained dogs, we could see the transformation in people's lives and we realized that yes, we needed to continue this process.

Q. Tell us about the training and matching?

A. We breed our own puppies and they are then placed with our volunteer foster families for about a year and a half. With these ordinary families they learn about ordinary situations. So a kid screams, there's laughter, there's glasses broken and the dogs are socialized to live within the family situations they will experience going forward.

Then they go into our prison program for 3-4 months. We have trained prisoners to teach the dogs discipline and self-control and they have to learn what's expected of them forward down the road. From basic obedience – sit, stay – to retrieving objects, to opening things, to taking off items of clothing, to touching buttons. They're with the men 24/7 and the men have all their attention focused on producing this dog to the standard. The prison services are delighted because the men are happy and the men are learning life skills with the dogs.

Then they come here to Cork, they have another three months to fine tune their skills and we assess what their strengths and weaknesses are. What type of person would they most benefit? Does the dog like a woman or a man, a girl or a boy? Do they work better in a city setting or countryside? We really take the personality of the dog and match it to the personality of the client.

We just trained a dog recently and the child is quite innocent and a bit immature, but has a bright future ahead of him. And equally, the dog is innocent, a little bit immature, but together they will grow together to be a fabulous partnership. That little boy will walk into adulthood be-

cause of his dog. So it is about partnership and teamwork.

Q. Over the last nine years, how many dogs have you matched with families?

A. We've matched 120 dogs and counting. The dogs cost €15,000 to train and prepare so we carefully measure how a dog is going to impact someone's life. One little boy who was matched was born with cerebral palsy. He was about 6-7 years old and he couldn't even weight-bear when he got his dog. Now he's playing rugby. Not very well, but still, he's able to run after a rugby ball and pick it up and throw it. For him it's a miracle. He's looking at a much different future.

There was a woman who was 29 years old, had never been outside her door by herself before getting the dog. Within the year of having the dog she is working full time on the bus everyday and now travels all over the country.

Another boy with spina bifida, who we didn't think would ever walk, is now walking and no longer using his wheelchair. It is amazing, the sense of independence and achievement these people gain with the presence of the dog helping them in basic tasks. These dogs give them confidence, independence and security.

What we often see is a lot of these children who are born with physical disabilities, they're always minded, and they've always been looked after and not much has been asked of them in terms of responsibility.

Whereas when we give them a dog and we say, "It is your job to feed the dog, it is your job to walk the dog, it is your job to look after the dog and if you don't do that, we'll have to take the dog back."

So you find that the children take on this responsibility. And the responsibility of knowing that yes, the dog will help them, but first and foremost, they must help the dog. It is a partnership that works the best. The families see their children growing and developing these skills, and becoming independent.

Q. What's your waiting list look like?

A. Our waiting list is 3-5 years. We have around 100 people on our list at the moment. It is hard to prioritize who is to receive a dog. We go into open discussions with the family and try to get to know their family. We get to know the clients and what they really need and want. If we make the right match we can make a bigger impact on their life.

Q. What happens after you've placed a dog with a family or individual?

A. Our relationship does not end. Once you get one of our dogs, we're part of your family. We'll know about personal events happening in your home. We like that close relationship and knowing the families because our dogs are like our children.

AS HUMAN BEINGS, WE ALL NEED PEOPLE TO HELP EACH OTHER. IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE WHAT THEY THOUGHT WAS IMPOSSIBLE. WE'RE DEFINITELY MAKING DREAMS POSSIBLE FOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND.



