

'Having Maggie gives me my independence'

Linda Staib-Jensen has maintained her independence with the help of a guide dog. Reporter **TARA O'CONNOR** went to meet her and her companion Maggie.



FOR MOST people, a pet dog is not as life-changing as for the 4,800 guide dog owners in the UK.

Guide dogs are the key to living an independent life for many blind and visually impaired people.

They include Linda Staib-Jensen, who has been paired with Maggie since January 2011. Linda is visually impaired and has been since birth; she has no peripheral vision and her sight may get worse.

The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association met with Linda around five times before Labrador/Golden Retriever mix Maggie was selected.

The charity chooses dogs based on the user's personality as well as their needs.

Linda describes Maggie as 'affectionate, obedient and a good companion'.

After her husband died in 2010, her need for a guide dog

was increased and as well as making it possible for Linda to get to work and go about her daily life, Maggie is a source of companionship.

Daily, Maggie will stop at the

roads and at the top of stairs. She also helps her navigate places with obstructions, such as the tables and chairs.

The connection between the pair was clear when I went to

meet them at the Taylor Fordyce office in Chobham Road, where Linda, from Sunningdale, works a personal assistant. Around the office when Maggie's not working

BEST PALS: Linda and her guide dog Maggie. Ref:123932-24



OBEDIENT: Maggie goes everywhere with Linda. Ref:123932-4

couldn't get her to go. She stood absolutely still. There was a chair in front of me that I couldn't see at all."

Linda has taught Maggie to help her find things when she drops them.

"If I drop something on the floor it's an absolute devil to find it," she said.

"What Maggie does now is if I'm at home and drop something, she comes and stands by it so I can find it."

The guide dogs association has been breeding dogs for more than 75 years, and can breed up to 1,500 puppies a year at the National Breeding Centre in Warwickshire, which was opened in 2011. It is the largest breeding programme in the world.

The puppies then go on to a volunteer puppy walker, where they learn simple commands and obedience training and meet regularly with walking supervisors.

At one year old they go on to puppy school where they are trained for around six months.

The dogs are then matched to an owner and the pair train together for three or four weeks, including residential training and in the owner's home.

Each dog costs around £50,000 over its lifetime which is paid for by the charity.

Visit www.guidedogs.org.uk for further information.

she is just like a normal pet.

But as soon as her harness goes on for a walk outside she changes and it is easy to see it. she is very focused.

Linda said it took time to get used to having Maggie around

but now it is 'second nature' and the two work together without having to think about it.

"Praise should be given to the Guide Dogs Association," said Linda. "Having Maggie

has changed my life and made me independent.

"Without her I wouldn't be able to go to and from work and go on public transport.

"There was one time I was urging her to go forward and



WALKIES: Maggie knows she has a job to do. Ref:123932-7



TAKING THE LEAD: Maggie at work. Ref:123932-22

Factfile:

■ The average working life of a guide dog in the UK is five to six years

■ There are nearly 4,800 guide dog owners in the UK

■ Guide Dogs for the Blind Association breeds up to 1,500 guide dog puppies each year and is responsible for 8,000 dogs

■ The lifetime cost of a guide dog is around £50,000

■ The guide dog service receives no government funding and relies completely on public support

■ In Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, West Sussex and Surrey there are around 22,000 people registered blind and partially sighted

■ Guide Dogs for the Blind Association also offers My Guide, where someone blind or partially sighted is matched with a sighted, trained volunteer