

When disability care has four legs

Pet therapy has long been accepted as a way to improve a person's wellbeing. Now, a renowned Israeli dog trainer is implementing his world-leading approach in Australia, bringing radical changes to the lives of people like Eran Picker. **Phoebe Roth** finds out more.

FOR the first 20 years of Eran Picker's life, he never slept a night through in his own room. Severe autism meant he would become distressed, would often hurt himself, and end up seeking comfort in his parents' bed.

During the daytime, his mother Elisheva had to be with him around the clock. He could not be relied upon to not wander off, and was unable to perform even some of the most basic tasks independently. But that's all different now, thanks to a Smooth Collie named Spot, and a world-renowned Israeli dog trainer, Yariv Ben-Yosef.

Now, at 23, Eran has been reaping the benefits of having Spot by his side for the last few years. And his family in Caulfield South have gained just as much. "It hasn't changed our lives; it's given us a new life," says Eran's father Kevin Picker.

Ben-Yosef grew up with animals all around him. At 13 years old, the manager of a zoo in Israel decided he had the talent to work with wildlife, and invited the young teenager to live with him and his family and learn the skills. "Every single morning, I went to school, I finished school at 2pm and I ran quickly to the zoo – until 18 years old. And I got an education in the zoo," he recalls.

It was a fitting beginning to a career which has since become an international success story.

Ben-Yosef founded the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs in Israel in 1994. Since then, he and his team have trained hundreds of dogs worldwide; not only for young people affected by autism, but for older people suffering from Alzheimer's, for people with epilepsy, and more.

Last year, on the urgings of Kevin Picker, Ben-Yosef came to Australia to develop his programs. Together with Picker, and a team including Caulfield South veterinarian Dr Onn Ben-David, they run the Centre for Service and Therapy Dogs Australia (CSTDA) in Melbourne.

"Yariv is bringing into Australia a level of knowledge and experience that hasn't been seen in Australia," insists Dr Ben-David. "He decided to come here on his personal visions, but really from my point of view – from Australia's point of view – it's actually



Eran Picker with Spot; the dog has irrefutably changed the young autistic man's life for the better.

Photo: Peter Haskin

helping develop an entire concept of caring for people with disabilities.

"We believe that dogs can be a great help to people with Alzheimer's, a great help to people with epilepsy, a great help for people with autism, or any of the autism syndromes ... There is a considerable volume of information about the medical benefits of humans just being with dogs."

The process of settling a dog with a family through the CSTDA is ongoing, beginning with detailed assessments of the individual's needs and their environment.

"The boy has transformed ... He looks a lot more relaxed, and happy, and content with himself ... the dog has brought about tremendous change."

Dr Onn Ben-David, Vet

Following that, Ben-Yosef works with Dr Ben-David to choose the most appropriate breed. In the first months of the dog's life, it will live with a foster family, where it will receive full basic training, from toilet training to exposure to public places.

Then, at what Ben-Yosef describes as a critical stage in the process, the team decides whether the behaviour of the dog indicates that it will be a good service dog. All the while, Dr Ben-David is overseeing the dog's health, while Ben-Yosef is looking after the training of the dog and regularly meeting with the clients.

Even once the dog has been placed with its new owner, regular consultations and training continue – something Dr Ben-David says is not happening elsewhere.

"It's very common in America, where someone trains a dog for a year or two, you come and buy it, they give you a bit of advice, like buying a computer or a television, and then you go home and you have to deal with that issue by yourself," Dr Ben-David says. "This is a totally unworkable situation. The system that Yariv wants is a system that is fully supportive."

According to Picker, this diligent approach has been key to his son's progress since becoming acquainted with Spot. "I was absolutely bowled over by [Ben-Yosef's] professionalism, his dedication.

"Yariv has a very deep-set philosophy. And that is to work with the person in their environment, with their family, with their carers, with their community. And use the dog as a tool to achieve therapeutic goals," he says.

Picker recollects calling some 300 dog trainers around the country to try to get a dog for Eran; but to no avail. "Some of them said 'Yes, of course we can.' I said, 'Do you know what autism is?' 'Yes.' 'How do you train a dog for a person who can't communicate?' 'Aaah...?' They didn't really understand."

To finally find what they were looking for in Israel was significant, Picker says, given the family are Jewish and Elisheva is Israeli. "I would have gone anywhere; if it would have been Timbuktu to get her, I would have," Picker insists.

Spot has helped Eran in a number

of ways. He had a tendency to pick things from bins in the street, but if he attempts that now, Spot will nudge him to stop. Walking down the street, Eran would make noises and potentially create a scene, but Spot is able to keep Eran's anxieties at bay to the point where he can undertake simple errands on his own.

Anyone who knew Eran before he had Spot can see a difference in his behaviour. "He walks, he looks, and he walks tall. He looks at me in the eye; before he was eyes down, didn't know where to look," says Dr Ben-David.

"To me, the boy has transformed. He has not resolved his problem – his medical problem is with him to stay. But he looks a lot more relaxed, and happy, and content with himself. I

think his family is much more relaxed, and enjoying life ... the dog has brought about tremendous change."

When Spot reaches old age, it is intended that her puppy will be trained to take on her role.

For Picker, perhaps important above all else is the companionship Spot has provided. "All of a sudden, my son has a friend," he says. "If you give the dog a job, you are giving the dog far more than anyone else is giving the dog, and the dog is far happier. It really is a win-win situation. And there are very few real win-wins, but that's one."

For more information, contact Kevin Picker on 0458 458 541, or email kevin.picker@cstda.com.au.



Yariv Ben-Yosef (right) working with a young client and his dog.