

We are delighted to share the wonderful news that, following successful completion of his two year accredited training, Barney has now qualified as an Autism Service Dog and been placed with a little boy and his family in Perth who was on our waiting list. Here below is their story.....

Born on 4th April 2014, Barney is part of a very special family with his mum, Dee Dee, being our first breeding Assistance Dog. With both parents having completed their Assistance Dog credentials, Barney and his six siblings excitingly signaled the start of our in-house breeding program. Little was Barney to know then just what a special future lay ahead.



Barney with litter siblings and during his first paw-steps of training

Barney commenced his basic training during June 2014. During these first 12 months Barney was raised in Victoria, nearby to siblings Rufus and Kelly. Raised in a home environment with volunteer puppy raisers, Walter and Judith, Barney started to learn basic commands such as sit, stay, watch, down, wait, fetch as well as lots of work on the lead.

Weekly puppy classes were a highlight as they also meant play time with his siblings, with Barney loving the chance to see his fast growing brother and sister!

During this time there is also emphasis on exposing the puppies to new sights, sounds and smells from a young age so they develop into a well-adjusted and adaptable dog.

This includes socializing with other dogs, experience on all modes of public transport and remaining focused on their training in busy community areas such as shopping centers.

By 5 months of age, Barney had mastered “down, sit, wait and release”. Barney was also learning how to walk calmly on a long loose lead – trickier than it sounds for a curious pup who loves to investigate every smell!



Advanced Training

Once he had arrived in Sydney, Barney started learning more complex commands such as TIP (to help him tip cupboards closed with his nose), ROPE (to find/pick up and retrieve his lead) and TUG (to learn how to open and close doors around the house).

Our Instructor team could quickly see what a gentle personality Barney was, becoming one of the team's firm favorites for his soft and loving nature. This, alongside his calm behavior with children indicated he would make a great Autism Assistance Dog.

His learning therefore began to focus on skills specific to the needs of autism, as the team began to assess an ideal match with a child on our waiting list.



Barney (right, front) feeling grown up on a training field trips with siblings Kelly and Rufus

Skills Barney was learning included:

- Learning to respond to visual cues when physical and emotional support is required such as meltdown situations.
- learning to 'block' his trainer, Rose, from other people - responding to cues 'side, heel, behind, front, stand' to position himself between Rose and the source of anxiety (eg a busy crowded place).
- Picking up and retrieving dropped items. In the home environment this skill could help a child put their toys away after playing, or bring a child's school uniform to him piece by piece to help the child with the transition of going to school.
- Learning to sense anxiety signals from his trainer and "visit" (resting his head in Rose's lap and making eye contact) – this acts as a strong emotional focus.
- Learning to read his trainer's body language and nudge arms and/or touch her face gently with his nose to 'interrupt' behavior which may develop into a meltdown. These simple acts can stop a child having a full meltdown which can lead to self-harming and take several hours to calm down from again.



The placement

As Barney continued to learn his advanced skills, the team found the perfect match for him. 11 year old Rhys from West Australia, was to be Barney's new owner. Rhys lives at home with his mum, dad and younger brother. Rhys has non-verbal autism, and communicates with his family using sign language.



Rhys' mum Kathleen (*pictured in blue above*) attended training with the Assistance Dog Australia team, and 3 other parents with children with autism in December. After a week of learning and sharing experiences, the parents parted ways, with their new Autism Assistance Dog in tow.

At first, Rhys wasn't sure what to make of Barney. But it only took a few days for the two of them to fall into sync with each other.

"Within the first few days we would find Barney and Rhys on their own lying side by side." Said mum Kathleen. With his calm, docile nature, Barney had earned Rhys' trust.

Rhys began to groom Barney, and started to participate in his feeding routine too. Now Rhys will feed Barney all by himself. Barney and Rhys also enjoy playtime together – Rhys finally has a friend to play with. "The interaction during fetch is priceless" said Kathleen.



As Rhys' confidence blossomed with Barney, so did the relationships within the family unit. Kathleen and Rhys now have special moments together, as they walk Barney together every day. "Taking Barney for a walk, this is now the most enjoyable and relaxing time spent with Rhys." Kathleen uses this opportunity to praise and empower Rhys, and Rhys is proud of what he achieves.

With nonverbal autism, the world can be a frustrating place for Rhys, and sometimes the only way he knows how to express himself is with loud stress noises and physical aggression. After a walk with Barney one evening, Rhys and Barney had a breakthrough moment. To the total surprise and disbelief of Kathleen, Rhys was able to express himself with something other than aggression - he hugged and kissed Barney. Kathleen had never seen Rhys do this before and was in absolute awe. "For the first time I had witnessed, not an autistic boy sitting with a dog, but just a happy boy sitting with **his** dog. No need to say nay more than that."



Barney has brought the whole family together. His presence keeps Rhys calm, and gives him a focus, meaning the whole family are able to take part in activities without worrying about how Rhys will react.

Recently, they were able to visit the shopping centre and enjoy a relaxing drink together – a first for the family. "Shopping centres are usually a no-go zone for Rhys. This was awesome. We were a family out doing something normal."

(left: Rhys and Kathleen walking Barney through the shopping centre, using his special double lead)

"Our goals for having a dog like Barney are for Rhys to have a friend, to assist us with family outings and assist Rhys with getting better at staying calm. I'm absolutely 'over the moon' with how things have gone so far with Rhys and Barney. I feel we are well on our way of achieving some of our goals and I'm excited about the journey still ahead."



Thank you for your fantastic support to help us train Barney and give Rhys increased independence.