



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

## "A different Light"

### **A Different Light 9 February 2019 – Love is a four-legged word**

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This week the news featured a very clever dog. This dog is able to sniff out prostate cancer: "The K9 Medical Detection NZ Charitable Trust, the University of Otago and a full medical advisory team are now working together to use dogs as a diagnostic tool to sniff out prostate cancer."

Heck! That's pretty impressive, I think as I eye our two dogs. They are tiny. They are hairy. They bark a lot. Are they well trained? No they are not. Could they be trained? Be a bit more useful? Hmmm, they are rather stuck in their naughty little ways. Alfie is somewhat more sensible than Lola, who is highly strung, is verging on neurosis. This developed after she was chased by Big Dogs when we first moved out to Ruakaka. She was gone all that day and night. In the early hours of the morning we heard a vague scratching at the back door. It was Lola, thank goodness. It was my birthday that day and I was sure that the planned celebrations and revelry would be thwarted by the gloom of a missing dog.

Ever since then she's barked insanely at any other dog or new person. When Gary Butt came around last weekend for the Ruakaka Surf Day, he bought his dog Kura. Kura is huge, a Labrador crossed with a bear. She is cool and calm and well behaved, the complete opposite of our hysterical hounds, who did not welcome her with open arms. Gary bought Kura up because she had always been popular with the kids at the surf day and indeed she was. She cruised around enjoying pats and strokes from many of the participants. In the past we have even had a dog that surfed with the participants.

Disabled people and dogs have quite a history. Obviously Guide Dogs have been assisting blind people for decades. More recently Therapy Dogs, Assistance Dogs and Mobility Dogs have become very popular. My friend Huhana Hiki a scholar of disabilities research and legal theory and a disabled activist has one. I have always been slightly cynical of Mobility Dogs. Do they really help? Are they a gimmick? Maybe it's my own poorly performing dogs that are giving me that somewhat negative perspective. (If I fall over Alfie helps by licking my head). I rang Huhana to ask her about her experience with her Mobility Dog. She talked about Finn, an eleven-year-old Huntaway Bearded Collie, who she has had for nine years.

"What's the best and the worst thing about him?" I ventured barely disguising my cynicism. "He is loyal, playful, enthusiastic and loving," gushed Huhana. She then went on to say that the worst thing about having Finn is "people and their behaviour around him. When I 'dug' further she explained, "People screaming at us for having him in a restaurant or mall, people letting their kids pull his tail

and hit him, people patting him without asking then getting offended when we ask them not to." I 'nosed' into how helpful Finn was for Huhana. "Well" she said, "he picks things up, gets the mail, helps me if I fall, he can get my phone if I'm unable to, he opens and closes doors and he's my companion". Wow! Turns out Finn was a rescue dog and was the second dog to graduate from the Wiri Women's prison dog training service , following which he did six months specific training as a Mobility Dog. Huhana then had one on one training with him for two weeks "So was it worth it?" I timidly enquired. "He certainly is worth it!" Huhana responded emphatically, "He has taught me patience and love, he works hard, and at times when I am sick he is key to helping me get well!".

Impressive. I am going to view our Sydney Silky terrorists in new light. I now know what they are capable of. I have great expectations of agility, obedience and general high performance., Yeah right!

*Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability - A Matter of Perception. A Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.*