



Guide Dog Nutmeg Brings Alan Fletcher New Joy

JOY was my guide, she was my eyes, she was my friend – a really good friend. After seven years by his side, the guide dog who allowed Alan Fletcher to regain a semblance of normality after losing his sight was taken suddenly by cancer. As abruptly as the illness claimed her, Alan's life came to a standstill once again – unable to so much as walk out of the door or cross a road on his own. Joy changed my life, explained the former BMW engineer from Stratton St Margaret. She was a joy by name and a joy by nature. I was back at square one without her. I was not going out much. My wife Shirley had retired at that point so she had to take me everywhere. It was difficult on us both. The depth of his bond with the black Labrador struck him following her passing on May 6, 2013. It was the May Bank Holiday weekend and we were out with the family. She was fine. But at around 3am she went up the stairs, jumped on the bed and lay next to me. She would never go upstairs unless she was told to. In the morning I rang the vet's. She had a tumour wrapped around her intestines so they said they needed to put her to sleep. She was eight and a half. My mum had died three weeks earlier, she was 93. We were devastated. It took me a month or two to get my head around it. We were numb.

The 66-year-old's life spun out of control when he began going blind in the late 1990s. What started as a loss of definition and problems focusing when going from darkness to light soon worsened. He was diagnosed with retinal dystrophy, a family of incurable degenerative eye conditions. Alan was registered severely visually-impaired in March 2005, and in 2009 an unrelated cancer was discovered behind his right eye. His only remaining vision is the odd faint flicker and in his left eye. From an independent professional man, he became housebound. Navigating around his own living room without falling over and hurting himself proved a near-impossible task. Cutting his food and eating without help also amounted to a challenge. When I first found out I thought 'Why me? What did I do to deserve this?' Why at this stage in my life?' I was 57 years old. I was going stir crazy at home. Trying to get out of the gate, I would walk in the middle of the road and bump into wheelie bins and lampposts. I was angry and scared. Even in your own home you didn't know where you were. I used to fall over the table or trip on the rug. I would get disorientated. It was terrible. My wife and I both had to start doing things differently. We had to change our whole lifestyle to help me overcome my blindness. When we ate, Shirley had to tell me where the food was using a clock, saying the potatoes are at 2 o'clock. I lost my independence and mobility. His options were limited. Refusing to live in fear and forgo his freedom, he applied for a guide dog.

In May 2006, Joy came into his life. That year he joined the Swindon Guide Dogs' fundraising effort. He became chairman of the group in 2008. Entrusting a dog, even a highly-trained animal, with his safety was more daunting than he had imagined. After a month spent learning to know each other, orientating in the neighbourhood and town centre and practicing commands with a trainer, Joy and Alan 'qualified' and were finally left to their own devices. The first day alone was the ultimate test. I was a bit wary. I didn't know if I was giving her the commands wrong. We just went around the area in a circle. It was a relief getting back home that first day. You trust a dog with your life. It's a dangerous environment out there at the best of times, let alone when you can't see. It's not until they said 'You can go out on your own with Joy tomorrow' that I thought, 'can I really let the dog take control of where I'm going? But after a couple of days, I realised she was there to keep me safe. I got my mobility, my independence and my freedom back.

Following Joy's death, Alan launched the 4JoyAppeal, in a bid to train more puppies to become seeing eye dogs. Since August 2013, the campaign has secured no fewer than £48,500. In October of that year, Alan was partnered with Nutmeg, a three-year-old Labrador and Retriever cross. The connection between them was instantaneous; so much so that the Guide Dogs trainer sent by the charity cut short the initial month-long acclimation period to two weeks. They were simply the perfect match. Nutmeg gave me my life back. She was so good and she settled in so well. It was unbelievable. She was so responsive and so reactive – it's unheard of. It was meant to be. Joy and Meggie are two different characters completely. She is replacing Joy, but she isn't Joy and Joy isn't Nutmeg. Having a dog was a way to get me back into life and Joy did that for me. Nutmeg has done that too.

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