

Alan Edbrooke and Hamlin

DOB: 17/10/1968 (48 in 2016)
Location: Kingsley, Bordon, Hampshire
Disability: Parkinson's disease
Occupation: Former IT manager
Dog breed: Golden retriever
 (Married to Janine – they have no children)



Alan was partnered with Hamlin in 2015 This is his story:

My dad and grandad both had Parkinson's disease, so I recognised the signs. I was losing coordination and shaking in the right-hand side of my body. I would lose my balance quite often, which resulted in some falls. I was also struggling with depression and anxiety, which are among the many hidden symptoms of the disease.

I left my job as an IT manager in 2004 because I had agoraphobia, causing panic attacks whenever I left home. It also affected my cognitive abilities to the extent that sometimes the simplest task could become very complicated for me to understand.

A lot of the time the thought of just leaving the house was horrific. Although I could drive I would find it difficult to be out in the open. Once I arrived somewhere I would feel awful and I would be shaking, so I was staying at home as much as possible and getting very little exercise.

The right-hand side of my body was curling inwards as my muscles tensed up over the years to cope with the shaking. This affected my posture and gait, which in turn caused back problems and nerve damage in my shoulder.

My wife found Canine Partners' website and after attending an open day at their southern training centre and talking to the team we decided that an assistance dog could be just what I needed to get my life back on track so I applied immediately.

When my application was approved I was over the moon, but I still couldn't quite believe it. Then when advanced trainer Els Boardman phoned and said they had a match the reality of it all started to settle in. We arranged to meet Hamlin with Els and another advanced trainer, Clare Cannon, soon after.

It seems funny now, but the instant I saw him I thought: "Oh my, he's so furry. Imagine all the hair that will come off of him." By the time we had finished talking he was asleep by my feet and I just fell for him. It was love at first sight.

Els and Clare asked what I thought and I told them I wanted to take him home right then, but I had to wait until Hamlin and I were fully trained. That was the hardest part – the waiting.

The course at Canine Partners' training centre was amazing but exhausting. It was a lot more tiring than I ever expected, even though I had been warned. However, it was very well organised, well thought out and a lot of fun.

My trainers were Els and advanced trainer Julia Chase, who both had different approaches to teaching, and that was just brilliant. I felt they could deal with any situation that came up and they were never short of advice or praise.

For the first week after we got home it was incredibly exciting, but also a bit stressful. I wanted to do everything right because of all the time, effort and care that had been put into training me and this wonderful dog.

Now we are completely settled and I get up in the morning looking forward to seeing Hamlin, whereas I used to find it hard to motivate myself.

As soon as I move, Hamlin's there, ready to help. We get up and I feed him and we play, then he goes back to bed for a while before we work out what to do for the day. He loves a quick lie down after breakfast.

Hamlin goes everywhere with me – even to the gym and Pilates, which is excellent for my back. Everyone there loves him.

I tried to go to the gym before, as exercise is essential for people who have Parkinson's, but I found it very stressful. There's something about having Hamlin with me that boosts my confidence.

He makes me more approachable as people see me with a beautiful dog rather than just seeing a big, nervous man who shakes a lot. People home in on Hamlin and end up talking to me as a result. He has removed some of my social discomfort. The difference he's made is incredible. You can't measure it.

One of the most important things about being with Hamlin is that he gives me a constant point of reference by my side while we're walking. When you have Parkinson's, stumbling and falling can be reduced with visual cues like having a dog walking gently by your side. He keeps me going straight when we're out and about.

He picks my keys up, which I'm forever dropping. He opens doors for me, helps with the washing machine and he helps me with my shoes because sometimes bending down puts a strain on my back. His favourite job is closing the dishwasher for me by flipping it up with his nose. He just loves it.

Hamlin has given me the courage to go back into the outside world, and my wife knows that, while she is at work, he is keeping me safe. Without him I would have become progressively more introverted and reclusive. He enables me to do exercises that help combat some of the effects of my illness and, in addition to all of these wonderful things, he makes me smile and laugh at his antics. He shows a level of devotion to me that I could never have imagined before. He is a joy to be with and I am proud to have him by my side.

Isabel Stanley and Tia

DoB: 22/08/1995
Location: Hook, Hampshire
Disability: Ehlers-Danlos syndrome
Dog: Labrador X golden retriever
Other info – currently studying development and politics at The Open University at The Open University

Isabel was partnered with canine partner Tia in October 2016. This is her story:

I was born with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome type 3 but I wasn't diagnosed until the age of 17.

Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome is a genetic disease caused by a defect in the body's production of collagen, leading to weak connective tissues and joint sockets that are shallower than normal. I experience frequent dislocations and subluxations (partial dislocations) in the majority of my joints, which causes chronic pain and inadequate time passes between the injuries for proper healing. Other symptoms include problems with my skin, hair, digestion, eyes, low blood pressure and sensory responses. My treatment regime includes medication, tailored physiotherapy, bracing and lifestyle changes including a strict diet. I've previously had surgery and a feeding tube.

In hindsight I displayed multiple indicators as a young child, some of which I was taken to doctors for, but they were dismissed as quirks or part of growth. I experienced health problems from the age of 10, and was diagnosed with ME, although this is now thought to have been a misdiagnosis.

While I missed multiple years of school due to my health problems I eventually returned to full-time education. I certainly had no restrictions on my future and believed with careful management there was no reason I couldn't live with relative good health and physical capabilities.

I experienced a rapid and significant decline in my health just after my 17th birthday, and had to leave sixth form just a week after starting my 2nd year. I was surprisingly calm when diagnosed because I was relieved to know what was wrong and thought it would mean I could start to get better. However it quickly became apparent I couldn't expect a significant recovery. The idea of a wheelchair was considered, but working with an amazing physiotherapist I've managed to remain ambulant.

However, I was dependent on other people for basic tasks and had no sense of independence or value. My life was dominated by fear. I was unable to be left at home for long periods of time, or go out alone, because of the risk of falls and injuries, and then being unable to get help. Like a lot of disabled people I've also experienced discrimination and ignorance which is incredibly frightening when you are so vulnerable.

I experienced constant pain and every movement was restricted to try and prevent joint dislocations. I couldn't do the most basic tasks for myself, and when I tried I struggled or failed completely.



I was frustrated with what I saw as my own failures. I was depressed because of my limitations. I was also afraid of my own body, the outside world and what my future would be.

I discovered Canine Partners after reading an article about American assistance dogs and searching online for similar charities in the UK. Canine Partners was the first link I clicked. Although I already knew about other forms of working dog, I had never imagined there could be a dog for someone like me.

I was on the waiting list for a Canine Partner for two and half years. It was excruciating and sometimes I thought it would never happen. In that time I began my degree with The Open University, and worked on maintaining my physiotherapy and building up my stamina. Tia was the light at the end of my tunnel and my motivation throughout.

Every time a letter came through the door with Canine Partners' stamp or the phone rang my heart stopped, and on the rare occasions I went out the first thing I did upon returning home was to check if the answer machine was flashing.

When advanced trainer Sara Trott called to say there was a potential match I could hardly hear her over the sound of my heart beating. I was lucky to find a few photos of Tia online. Although young in all of them, she was beautiful and I wondered if she was really the dog Sara had been referring too. It felt almost too good to be true.

I met Tia in the main arena at the training centre in Heyshott. The first thing I noticed was her unusual fox-red colour and her beautiful face and long dainty legs. She gave me kisses all over my face which seemed a good sign! When she laid at my feet while we were talking her paw just ever so slightly touched my shoe, so I was trying to remain still so she wouldn't move it. She still does that all the time.

The two-week on-site training course was tiring and emotionally turbulent. I cried for the first time in years, but I also smiled more than I had in years as well. There is so much information to absorb and so many new experiences in a short space of time but Sara and Tia were excellent teachers. I tried to remind myself to stop and notice all the details and moments because I knew in the future these would be memories I would treasure forever.

Coming home felt like the beginning of a new way of life. It was exciting but scary. Suddenly she was entirely my responsibility and I just wanted to do everything correctly. I was so worried I would do something wrong. The first few nights I kept flashing a torch on her just to check she was OK.

Tia settled in with my family well. Within a week everyone was saying it felt like she had been with us for ages. In the beginning both Tia and I were learning about each other and adapting to our new routine. Now we are in sync.

The change in my health in the time I have had her is outstanding. My stamina has consistently improved far beyond what I had ever dared hope I would ever achieve again. I feel safe and brave, and we are starting to explore new opportunities. Even in appearance the change has been so extreme family and friends are constantly commenting on it.

Tia is trained to pick things up, fetch certain items on command including my walking stick and our house phones, both on command and when they ring. She can do the laundry, fetch someone in an emergency, get the post, open and close doors, cupboards, the fridge and drawers, flick switches including the disabled buttons for doors when out, remove shoes and undo Velcro, pull sleeves and drag a basket. She is currently learning to carry a small basket and take items to another person.

She utilises most of these tasks day-to-day. She manages all the household washing and isn't happy if anyone tries to take that job! I no longer have to bend when I drop things or to take off shoes, which has minimised what were frequent injuries to my ribs. My fingers no longer trouble

me as much because she does activities for me that previously put a lot of pressure on them. It all really adds up to make a huge physical difference.

If I didn't have Tia then my life would revert back to how it was before I got her, but the big difference would be I would have no hope of it changing.

Tia and I really are perfectly matched. We both have a strong perfectionist streak and she loves to learn.

She is very sensitive to mood and health. When I wake up in the morning she already knows if I am going to have a bad day, before I'm even conscious enough to know, and she changes her behaviour accordingly. If someone is hurt or upset she immediately senses it.

Tia has such a joy of life. When she does a task well or gets home after working she wriggles with joy. Her capacity for love and caring is endless and she has a confidence in herself and will make her feelings known. For example, when someone else loaded the washing machine she unloaded it behind them!

She takes working very seriously, like she knows how important her job is. This makes me utterly confident in our teamwork when we're out, I now always feel safe with Tia looking after me.

I couldn't pick a single favourite thing about Tia, but the confidence and fearlessness she gives me is empowering.

While I am completing my degree I am focussed on building my health and stamina up to a point where I would be capable of working and/or entering postgraduate education. Before it was a dream, but now with Tia it is an achievable reality.

Jon Flint and Jester

DoB: 25/06/1975

Location: Nr Midhurst, West Sussex

Disability: Spinal injury

Jon was partnered with canine partner Jester in October 2015. Jester's training with Canine Partners and subsequent partnership with Jon has been funded by Help for Heroes.



Jon was previously paired with canine partner Varick who sadly passed away in 2015, and now has successor dog Jester. Jon comes from a military background, having served in the Royal Marines in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. Jon sustained a spinal injury whilst in service, and took part in the Invictus Games in 2014 and 2016 as a member of the UK squad. Jon also took part in the closing ceremony of the 2012 Paralympics alongside Help for Heroes. He is just completing his studies for a degree - BA(hons) International Relations and History - before embarking on a new career outside of the armed forces.

Jon is also a trustee for Canine Partners and was selected for the specific expertise that he brings to Canine Partners along with his enthusiasm and vision for the charity's continuing growth and success.

Here's Jon's story: "The initial injury to my back happened in 1996 when I fell whilst abseiling on an exercise at night. It seems I broke a vertebra in my lower back, but I didn't actually find out until 2010. Later, whilst serving in Afghanistan, I sustained another injury to my spine (a stress fracture between my shoulder blades) and it's that injury I now have the most problems with. I left the Corps in 2007, but it wasn't until mid 2008 that things started to go downhill for me.

"Before I had a canine partner life was not great. I would try to get around just using a walking stick and consequently I had a lot more falls. Because my balance is compromised, a little knock in the street would take me out, so walking down the street was a massive issue for me. That's not to mention all the other day to day tasks in the house that became so challenging with my limited balance and strength. My family struggled to leave me at home alone for fear I would fall and couldn't get help. That's where having a canine partner changed everything for me.

"I already knew about Canine Partners as the charity's Southern Training Centre is so close to home for me. When I first went to the centre in West Sussex, I didn't go there to be partnered with an assistance dog. It was my wife Sarah's idea. I was still really upset about previously having to re-home our pet spaniel Oppo who was just too much for us to cope with now that my condition had worsened, but I loved being around dogs and wanted another. We went there to find a really steady dog as a companion after living with an exuberant spaniel, so the idea of a 'failed' dog from Canine Partners seemed to be the best way forward. I knew that there was quite a waiting list for dogs that had not quite made the grade – dogs don't make it for all sorts of reasons; from being scared of traffic to health reasons such as problems with their hips.

"Sarah and I walked into the lobby at the training centre and were met by a very nice lady who asked why we were there, so we told her about Oppo and that that we wanted to look into adopting a failed dog. Immediately, she looked at my stick and asked if I had any disabilities. When I told her

what my injuries were, she said that she was sorry but she didn't think that a failed dog would be a good idea. Instantly I was gutted. I thought that this was it, but she was still talking and she was talking about me getting an assistance dog myself. My first reaction was 'but I'm not in a wheelchair', I didn't think I'd qualify, but she thought that it was a good idea that I apply.

"It took me a while to get my head around it but, in the end, after a chance meeting with somebody who already had a canine partner I decided that getting one myself was going to be good for me.

"I was first partnered with a canine partner in December 2011. This was Varick, the outgoing and incredibly courageous – or some might say balmy – flat-coated retriever. Varick was incredible and at home known as my shadow. He went everywhere with me and turned my life upside down for the better. I was independent again and the world wasn't such a daunting place anymore.

"Sadly Varick died just before his fifth birthday. We had been partnered for just over three years. Varick's sudden death was incredibly difficult to come to terms with and to be honest, I don't think I ever will. The bond between a partner and their assistance dog is like no other. You are part of each other and without one another a huge part of you is missing. Losing Varick didn't just affect my life, but the lives of those around me who I love and without whom I don't know how I would manage to cope day to day. It also brought forward the hardest questions - what's going to happen next? Where do I go from here? Do I have another partnership or do I try and learn to cope without an assistance dog?

"Eventually I decided I could and should look at getting another assistance dog. Meeting said dog, Jester, was an incredibly hard day. I knew I needed another dog, but I was still missing Varick so much. It was not an easy decision to make.

"On meeting the chap that later I would call my sunshine boy, I could see straight away what a star he was. I was hesitant however because the thought of getting so emotionally involved again with another dog was really scary. Still I had to weigh that up against the help and security I knew he would give my family and me.

"We were partnered and after the same two week course I'd previously done with Varick, we were home. Jester was amazing! He got into the swing of things straight away and quite honestly it was a little like picking up where Varick had left off.

"Jester has given me my freedom back once more (I've lost it twice now - once when my health took a dive and then again when we lost Varick). Because he's so 'bombproof' I feel like with him by my side, I can have a go at anything I want to.

"Life with a canine partner is so different to before. If I'd not had Varick and now Jester I wouldn't have done a lot of the things that I have. I wouldn't have had the confidence to and I wouldn't have been physically able to. Jester means that my family can leave me in the house alone in the knowledge that if I fall he'll get the phone for me to call help. He'll pick things up for me so that I am less likely to fall and he'll stay with me when I'm having a 'bad day'. It is all of these things and more that mean I am eternally grateful to Canine Partners for the way that both Varick and Jester as truly amazing dogs have transformed my life.

"I became a trustee for Canine Partners in 2014. I applied as a friend thought my knowledge and experiences would be able to help the charity. Nobody was more surprised than me when I was actually asked to be a trustee!

"I'm now very proud to be a part of what Canine Partners have achieved and I'm happy that I was able to play a small part in that. It's definitely not 'job done' though. I think there are still some big challenges ahead, but I think that the charity will be able to overcome those challenges. As Andy, CEO always says, onwards and upwards and with Jester by my side I can certainly second that."

You can read more on Jon's journey with Canine Partners on his blog: www.varick.co.uk.

Natalie Preston and Faye

DoB: 21/6/1989 (27 in 2016)
Location: Southport, Merseyside
Disability: cerebral palsy

Hopes to work in TV and dreams of inspiring more TV companies to feature disabled people on programmes.

Natalie was partnered with canine partner Faye in July 2013. This is her story:

At the age of six months my parents noticed that I wasn't developing as I should have been. I was very floppy and I wasn't engaging like other babies of that age were.



They took me to Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool where I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. The doctors told my parents there was no hope for me. They said my parents should make me comfortable and have more children as I would never walk, talk or sit up.

But after years of therapy and hard work I defied the doctors and before I was three-years-old I was walking and talking.

When I was small my parents were doing six hours of therapy with me six days a week with support from other family members, friends and students at Southport College, which helped train my brain how to sit, walk, talk and crawl. I still have to do about an hour of therapy a day.

I went through mainstream school and despite being told I would never achieve anything in the way of GCSEs - I did and I have since continued my studies. I graduated from the University of Lancashire with a degree in animation in 2013 and then in 2015 I achieved a master's degree in children's media production at Salford University.

I heard about Canine Partners after my pet dog died. I wanted to start being more independent and not have to rely on other people all the time. I had undergone major spinal surgery to straighten my back which has affected my mobility. I am unable to bend, take my shoes and socks off or pick things up off the floor – I drop things quite a lot. It's also difficult to pick things off the shelves in shops.

I applied to Canine Partners and visited the charity for an assessment. I was so excited and couldn't wait for the call to say that I had been matched. A year later the call finally came and I met Faye for the first time.

I instantly fell in love with her and from day one I felt we had a special connection. She was gorgeous and I couldn't wait to do my two weeks' residential training. During the training course at the charity's Midlands training centre Faye and I became even closer to each other. Since meeting her, the world around me has become brighter every day.

At the end of each day of training we would lie on the floor together and as I talked to her she would gaze into my eyes. I felt she was heaven-sent. It was on the first day of the course that I found out I had been accepted on my master's degree.

The time since I have had Faye has been the best of my life. I wake up to a fresh new day not having to think about how I will cope or and not worrying about dropping things because I know Faye is always by my side ready to help me. And if I drop something she immediately gets it and gives it back to me.

Faye helps me get ready in the mornings and brings me my phone and keys without me having to ask her. She gets the washing out of the machine, she gets the post for me and she picks things up from the floor. She also helps take my shoes and socks off, flushes the toilet, puts things in the bin and gets money out of the cash machine after I've entered my pin number.

During my master's degree she gave me confidence to travel alone on the train to university each day and gave my parents piece of mind that I was being taken care of.

Before having Faye I was very shy and self-conscious. I would worry about what other people thought of me, but now Faye has completely changed that. People actually talk to me now, rather than talking about me or just ignoring me.

She has also given me the confidence to want to move out of my parent's house because I know I won't be alone.

I love Faye so much. She has completely turned my life around. She's given me my life back and she's given me something to look forward to.

I could not possibly imagine being without Faye. She has simply changed my life. All I can say is thank you Canine Partners for giving me my life back. Faye helps me and I love caring for her - together we are a real team.

Paul Phillips and Ralph

DoB: 19/07/1992 (25 in 2017)

Location: Harpenden, Hertfordshire

Disability: spinal injury (tetraplegic)

Dog: golden retriever (born 29/11/14)

Other info – had been a carpenter for five years before accident (since 15) and had just got his dream job fitting kitchens. He's now planning a career as a counsellor.

Paul was partnered with canine partner Ralph in October 2016. This is his story:



I was an ordinary 20-year-old lad enjoying my life and working in my dream job with a kitchen fitting company. I had a long-term girlfriend and a wide range of friends.

On the 10th November 2012 my life changed forever. I was driving my new car late at night when I crashed and broke my neck. I spent two long months in intensive care, fighting for my life. When my family spoke to the doctors they were told I have a high-level spinal cord injury and would be paralysed from my neck down.

Once I was finally well enough to be moved out of intensive care I spent another seven months in the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore getting specialist care and learning how to live with my injuries. I was taken off heavy medication and was beginning to learn to breathe without a ventilator when I started to get movement back in my left arm. Eventually, after a lot of physiotherapy, occupational therapy and hard work I was able to move both my other arm, but I cannot use my hands. However, with good control of my left wrist, I have learnt to use my finger and thumb to pick up small objects and use a splint on my index finger to type on a phone or tablet. I now need 24 hour support from carers.

I also suffered severe depression due to the accident and life changes. The matron of the ward allowed my family's two pet dogs to come into the side room to see me in order to help my low mood. Our cockapoo would sit on my bed so I could stroke him. This would always brighten up my day. Some months later, on my 21st birthday in July 2013, I was discharged.

It was decided I was best to continue living with my parents until I got used to my new life. When I came home I wasn't sure what life would be like and very quickly got bored. All my family and friends work so during the week I had nothing. Because I had nothing to do I found I would sleep until late afternoon then get up and play computer games. I also had a lot of hospital appointments as my health wasn't great and I was in and out of hospital for various reasons.

In July 2014, a year after coming home, I went on a multi-activities course in the Lake District with a charity that supports people with spinal cord injuries. During the course I was shown that my life wasn't over, as I once thought, and there is still plenty I can do. I went sailing, swimming and used specialist equipment to go off-road and up a mountain. This course was a wake-up call for me and I started trying to get my life back on track. I volunteered to do speeches in secondary schools about road safety. I decided I wanted to look at my experience in a positive way and try to help others.

I also got a membership to watch Arsenal football matches and started trying to get out more. I started taking our pet dogs out with my family and really enjoyed the fresh air. This was something I had missed. I was lucky to have an indoor/outdoor wheelchair so I could get out on paths but found it difficult off-road. I then found an all-terrain wheelchair on the internet and I'm now able to go anywhere I want in any weather, which is great.

While at an Arsenal match I saw someone go past in a wheelchair with an assistance dog. I did some research and came across Canine Partners. At first I thought I was too disabled to have a dog. The more I started thinking about it the more I wanted to at least apply and see what happens. I started looking through Canine Partners' website again and was reading about someone who has an assistance dog. I realised he had a spinal cord injury and our level of disability was roughly the same. After getting all the relevant paperwork together and sending it off, I had a phone call about an assessment day. It was a great day. I got to work with lots of different dogs and could tell instantly I'd benefit from having one.

Around 18 months later I met Ralph. As soon as he saw me he came straight over and licked my face. There was an instant connection and I knew he was the dog for me. He stood beside me so I could stroke him and stayed there for the rest of the afternoon. A few weeks later I went back for a two-week training course. I was really excited to see Ralph again and he seemed just as excited to see me. The training course was very tiring and, at times, hard work but it was also fun and the more we were practising tasks together the more excited I was about my future with Ralph.

When we got home after the course I let Ralph have a look around. Once he had settled down in the garden with a toy we let our pet dogs say hello. They immediately played and got on well.

Ralph and I practise tasks on daily basis and he has already made an immediate impact on my life. He presses an alarm that calls the carer if I need of help and can't call them myself. He picks things up and gives them to me like my phone and finger splint. He takes my jacket off and my gloves in the winter and he helps remove my blankets if I get too hot at night. He also opens and closes doors for me on a daily basis and he sometimes presses the controller to my electronic assistive technology for me, turning on or off lights, fans, heaters and my TV and also helping me phone people if I need to. He's also been practising pressing the buttons at traffic lights.

Having Ralph by my side has not only made me more independent, he has made me a lot healthier. Since having Ralph I am no longer anxious or in and out of hospital constantly. I don't know if it's the fresh air I'm getting or the fact I now have a purpose in life and someone else to worry about. I can be at home on my own and I take Ralph out for a long walk on my own every day - I enjoy every second of it. Being able to be on my own is quite a big thing for me. For the last four and half years I haven't been able to be on my own, even for a ten minute wander round the block due to ill health or the fact that if I drop something I can't pick it up.

Ralph is also great fun to have around and he keeps me motivated. He also makes me laugh a lot as he can be quite cheeky – he sometimes brings me the house phone or remote control even if I don't need them just so he can get a treat.

In just a few weeks I will be moving out of my parents' house and into a specially adapted flat. This is to give me more independence and start a new chapter in my life as I'm now 25 years old. If I didn't have Ralph think I would be very nervous and not looking forward to it but he gives me the confidence I need to know that I'll be fine on my own.