



NO HUMAN COULD HELP THIS TROUBLED LITTLE BOY. THEN HE MET A DOG CALLED CHANCER

When love, medical science and time failed to calm their mentally impaired son, Donnie and Harvey Winokur found hope in man's best friend. By Melissa Fay Greene

In May 1999, Donnie Winokur, 43, and her husband, Harvey, 49, beheld the son of their dreams – the child infertility had denied them. Andrey, a pale, dark-eyed one year old in a cotton onesie, held in a standing position by a carer, appeared in a video recorded in a Russian orphanage. If the couple liked the little boy, they could begin the legal process of adopting him. They liked him very much.

Three months later, the Winokurs flew to Russia from their home in Atlanta, Georgia, to adopt Andrey, who they renamed Iyal, and an unrelated little girl two days younger than him, who they named Morasha. The

family arrived back home to congratulations, gifts and helium balloons.

“Sometime after their third birthdays, our wonderful fairytale of adopting two Russian babies began to show cracks,” reveals Donnie, now 55. Unlike bright and cheery Morasha, Iyal grew oppositional and explosive. He was a sturdy, big-hearted boy with a wide, open face, shiny black hair in a bowl cut and a winning giggle. But, triggered by the sight of a cartoon image on a plastic cup, or an encounter with Morasha’s Barbie dolls, he threw tantrums that shook the house. In a fast-moving car, he unfastened his seatbelt and tried to jump out. He awoke every night in a rage. In preschool, Iyal ploughed his tricycle into other children without remorse (or maybe without awareness).

He tried to kiss strangers, or feel their toes. “Iyal’s disabilities,” says Harvey, “began to define our family’s existence.”

For more than a year, specialists examined Iyal without reaching consensus. Finally, he was seen by Dr Alan Weintraub, a developmental paediatrician. He concluded that Iyal’s brain and central nervous system had been irreversibly damaged in utero. Though alcohol consumption by Iyal’s birth mother could not be documented, available evidence pointed to foetal alcohol syndrome, the most extensive of the range of effects known as foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD.

Iyal was intellectually impaired and at high risk for a range of secondary disabilities, including limited academic achievement, ►

Iyal Winokur, 13, and his service dog, Chancer, share a special bond that has defied medical experts.



Chancer has made a marked difference to the Winokur household: (from left) Iyal, mum Donnie, dad Harvey, sister Morasha and Donnie's father. Above right: the Winokurs adopted their children from Russia in 1999.



unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, imprisonment and mental health problems. Few medications or therapies could be recommended as effective.

At nine years old, Iyal babbled a stream of senseless chatter and baby talk. He required a full-time aide at school and his mother's undivided attention at home. But if their friends had wondered aloud what the family's lives would have been like if they hadn't adopted Iyal, the Winokurs would have reacted with horror. "It's unbearable to imagine our child growing up without us," affirms Donnie. "We never considered dissolving the adoption. We fell in love with our son."

As Donnie found her footing in the parallel universe of special needs families, she discovered that a non-profit service dog agency in rural Ohio placed autism assistance dogs with children. Could a service dog help Iyal? "Are you kidding me?" cried her husband. "We don't need a dog!" He felt that one more living creature whining for attention, one more source of strife between the children, would push him beyond endurance. "No, Donnie. It's too much."

"This could be the help we need," she persisted. "A dog?" said Harvey. "Forget about it, please. It's me or a dog."

Karen Shirk, 49, operates a dog training school in Xenia, Ohio. As a young woman, she pursued a master's degree in social work and held a full-time job with cognitively impaired adults. Then, at 24, after collapsing one day in respiratory distress, she was diagnosed with myasthenia

gravis, a rare neuromuscular disorder. She became a respirator-dependent patient in need of constant care.

Six years into her illness, with Shirk supine in front of the TV, a nurse suggested she get a service dog. Aside from the practical assistance the dog could offer, the nurse suspected that a dog might also jump-start the life of this sad and lonely patient.

For two years, Shirk applied to service dog agencies, but was rejected by every one. Finally, with her patient growing dangerously depressed, the nurse put her foot down. "Karen," she said, "get up, and let's get you a puppy."

The nurse drove Shirk to see a litter of black German shepherd pups, and there she found Ben. "I didn't leap back into life with Ben so much as inch back into it," she recalls. Ben had to be taken outside and to obedience classes. Wherever he frolicked, strangers greeted the woman in the wheelchair as they did not when she was alone. It was a lesson Shirk wouldn't forget.

When one-year-old Ben graduated from obedience classes, he was a gorgeous animal with a shiny black coat, brown eyes and feathery tail. He wasn't a complex thinker or problem-solver, but he was smart, and Shirk loved him.

She got a wheelchair-adapted van and commuted to a dog training school, where Ben learnt the basics of mobility work: to open and close doors and drawers; to hand Shirk's wallet to retailers and return it to her lap; to brace her for balance as she moved between bed and wheelchair; and to remove her shoes, socks and jeans at bedtime. "When

I asked for water, Ben opened the fridge and brought me a bottle," she reveals. "When I asked for laundry, he pulled my clean clothes out of the dryer, put them in a basket and dragged them over."

With Ben at her side, Shirk became the manager of a day-care facility for cognitively impaired adults. Gaining in strength and confidence, she wondered how many other people were being told, like she had been, that they were "too disabled" to get a dog. "I could start my own agency," she thought. "I could place four or five dogs a year with people rejected by the big agencies."

In October 1998, she founded 4 Paws for Ability, a non-profit corporation. She rescued Butler, a German shepherd mix, from a shelter; hired a trainer to prepare him for mobility work with a paralysed 12-year-old girl; and became a pioneer among service dog agencies. "People started calling from all over to ask, 'Am I too young? Am I too old? Am I too disabled? Am I disabled enough?'" recalls Shirk. "I said, 'If your life can be improved by a dog, and if you and your family can take good care of a dog, we're going to give you a dog.'"

The 4 Paws dogs are a mix of shelter dogs, donated dogs and puppies bred in-house, and every one receives 500 hours of training, well beyond the 120-hour industry standard. For socialisation, trainer Jeremy Dulebohn places foster puppies with local families, and for basic obedience training he places them with specially chosen prison inmates. "Convicted murderers cry when it's time to give back their dogs," says Shirk. "But we give them another

one." Since most 4 Paws dogs go to children – and children want playmates more than they want therapists – Dulebohn asks the prisoners to teach their pups tricks, including "roll over", "speak", "gimme five" and "play dead".

"I learnt with Ben that a dog helps you make friends," says Shirk. "We place dogs with kids in wheelchairs, kids on ventilators, kids with autism, kids with dwarfism, kids with seizure disorder and cognitive impairments. But if your dog does tricks, other kids want to meet you. Kids will ignore your disability if you've got a cool dog."

One prisoner with a sense of humour returned a dog who, upon hearing the command "play dead", lurched as if shot, staggered across the floor, knelt, got up, buckled, whined piteously and then dramatically collapsed.

In 2007, a phone call came into 4 Paws from an Atlanta mother of a boy with special needs. Iyal Winokur's doctors had tried 20 different medications, without lasting success. Iyal was nine; his IQ was 80 and falling; his language was primitive. He got hooked on bizarre thoughts and repeated them endlessly. He still suffered from night terrors and bedwetting. Sometimes Iyal

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touched his mother's shirt, sniffed his fingers and tried to wipe off the smell.

Shirk had never heard of foetal alcohol syndrome.

"Is your son likely to verbally abuse a dog?" she asked.

"Well, yes," Donnie had to admit.

"Is he likely to try to physically abuse a dog?"

"It's not impossible," Donnie had to reply, now certain of rejection.

"OK," said Shirk. "We'll need a doctor's prescription and we'll need video. We want to see your son every day, everywhere – getting up in the morning, eating breakfast, getting in a car, at school, at bedtime. We need to hear his noises and see his tantrums."

"You'll give us a dog?" gasped Donnie, incredulous.



After being diagnosed with a neuromuscular disease, Karen Shirk (left) was encouraged to get a service dog by a concerned nurse. Her experience inspired her to set up 4 Paws for Ability (above right), a facility for training and placing service dogs.

That night at home, Harvey gasped, too. "Thousands of dollars for a dog?" he cried. "Instead of for a nanny, or respite care, or a private school? Does that make sense? A dog's not going to mean anything to Iyal."

"It might," countered Donnie.

In January 2008, Donnie, her father, her cousin and her children drove to Xenia for a 10-day class with other families and their new dogs. A circle of sofas and canvas chairs surrounded the training area in a hall.

For children with autism or behaviour disorders, dogs are trained in "behaviour disruption". For children with seizure disorders, diabetes or respiratory issues, dogs are trained to alert parents at the onset of an episode, and

there have been a few able to predict the medical incidents six to 24 hours in advance (how they do this is a mystery).

Dulebohn matched Iyal with Chancer, a big golden retriever. Though he'd been neglected as a puppy, like all 4 Paws dogs Chancer was shown kindness and affection in the course of his training, but was not offered long-term, close human friendship. "Once dogs have been matched with families, we pet them and love them, but we don't give them that intense kind of one-on-one attention," explains Shirk. "We don't take them home with us at night. Every one of our dogs wants that closeness, is primed for that closeness, but we want them to find it with their families, not with our staff." Chancer didn't know what he was missing.

But his trainers knew. "Chancer," says Dulebohn, "really needed a boy."

The dog's deeply encoded desire to attach to humans came alive when he was introduced to the Winokurs. A shaggy, tawny giant, he panted with pleasure. Morasha dropped to her knees and embraced Chancer's neck. "Hi, good boy," cooed Donnie, stroking his broad, handsome head. Iyal was briefly interested, but then wandered off.

At the conclusion of the second day's class, the families were invited to keep their dogs overnight for the first time. At the hotel, Donnie's cousin took Chancer for a walk while Donnie supervised Iyal and Morasha in the jacuzzi. "When they came back from their walk," says Donnie, "Chancer looked around and then broke away! I thought, 'Oh, my God, he's escaping. We're going to lose him.' He streaked past everybody and took a flying leap into the tub. He was saving Iyal!"

Part of the havoc wreaked by alcohol on a child's brain is that emotional pathways to friendship, fun, intimacy and love are underdeveloped or buried. But Iyal's laughter when the big dog came sailing through the air and clumsily exploded into the water was the best sound his mother had heard from him in a long time.

The morning after Chancer's first night in their house, the Winokurs woke after a full night's sleep for the first time since 1999. They looked at each other in semi-horror: was Iyal still alive? They found him snoozing beside his dog, the latter hogging the bed. Since Chancer's arrival, they've rarely been disturbed in the night. Iyal may still wake up, but he's evidently reassured by the dog's presence and returns to sleep.

"The moment he walked into the house with Chancer, I knew ►

emotional



Chancer will never “cure” Iyal, but he helps make the boy’s world a less incomprehensible place.

something had changed,” remembers Harvey. “I could feel it instantly, the magnetism between Iyal and the dog.”

When Iyal is distressed, Chancer is distressed. Unlike Iyal, Chancer knows what to do about it. Iyal rages by crossing his arms, sitting down hard on the floor and screaming and kicking. Chancer unknots the crossed arms by inserting his muzzle through them from below, opening them up and nuzzling towards Iyal’s face, licking and slobbering, until the boy’s screams turn to tears of remorse or to laughter.

Chancer sometimes heads off tantrums before they start. From two floors away, sensing that Iyal is nearing breaking point, he gallops to find him, playfully headbutts and pushes him down to the floor, gets on top of him, stretches out and relaxes with a satisfied groan. Helplessly pinned under Chancer, Iyal resists, squawks and then relaxes, too. The dog lies on top of the boy he loves, and seals him off from the incomprehensible world for a while.

“We trained Chancer to disrupt tantrums,” explains Dulebohn. “He may be reading Donnie’s body language, smelling chemical changes in Iyal or hearing noises from him that predict a tantrum. He feels rewarded when Iyal stabilises.”

Says Donnie: “Lately – and this is the best yet – if Iyal gets distressed, he goes to find Chancer and he curls up next to him. He picks up Chancer’s big paw and gets under it.” It’s the closest the boy has come to mood self-regulation.

Two weeks after Chancer’s arrival, Iyal startled his parents by using multisyllabic words. He was suddenly possessed of opinions, judgements and important questions. “BC, Before Chancer, which is how we refer to our life then, Iyal echoed Morasha word for word,” says Donnie. “It drove her nuts. Every morning

I asked, ‘Do you want to take your lunch today or eat lunch at school?’ and Iyal parroted whatever Morasha said. If she said, ‘School,’ he said, ‘School.’ With his frontal-lobe damage, decision-making like that was difficult for him. One morning, AC [After Chancer], when I asked about lunch, Morasha said, ‘School,’ and Iyal said, ‘I’d rather have lunch from home than a school lunch.’ It was a more sophisticated expression of his thoughts than we’d ever heard.

“BC, driving in the car with Iyal, if I turned down an unfamiliar route, he might say, ‘What happened?’ AC, sensing I’d taken a wrong turn, Iyal asked: ‘Were you distracted by Chancer and that’s why you made a bad turn?’ That showed an understanding of cause and effect, and a high-level word choice.

“BC, Iyal never mentioned his disability, although we have educated him about it. AC, he suddenly started asking things like, ‘Did Chancer’s birth mother drink alcohol?’ and, ‘Does Chancer have a boo-boo on his brain?’ and, ‘Why did my birth mother drink alcohol?’”

Before Chancer, Iyal didn’t seem to possess “theory of mind”, the insight,

“The moment Iyal walked in with Chancer I knew things had changed,” says Harvey Winokur. “I could feel the magnetism between them”

usually achieved by age four, that other people have points of view different from your own. But Chancer has inspired him to think about what Chancer likes and what he thinks. Only since the dog’s arrival has Iyal shown sheepishness or regret following a tantrum, signalling a new awareness that his outbursts may affect others. “Is Chancer mad at me?” he asks. “Mommy, tell Chancer I love him, OK?”

The science behind Iyal’s cognitive leaps is still in its infancy. “The non-judgemental responses from animals are especially important to children,” says Alan Beck, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University’s School of Veterinary Medicine in Indiana. “If your child with FASD starts to misbehave, your face may show disapproval, but the dog doesn’t. The performance anxiety this

child may feel is absent when he’s with his dog. Suddenly he’s relaxed. He’s with a peer who doesn’t criticise him.”

The hypothesis is that the drop in Iyal’s anxiety level frees up cognitive energy that he can use for thought and speech. “A child with a disability feels freer not to suppress his ideas and behaviours when he’s with his dog,” says Beck. “There’s a level of trust and confidentiality he has with no-one else.”

But Chancer has not cured Iyal.

“From the moment Iyal wakes up in the morning, there’s tension in the house,” admits Donnie. “He has neurological and psychological damage that Chancer’s paws can’t reach. But Chancer mitigates the disability. It’s like we have a nanny.”

With every year, the challenges to Iyal’s safety, and the wellbeing of those around him, multiply. Iyal’s attempts to touch his mother inappropriately are escalating. “Harvey and I feel like we’re sitting on a volcano,” says Donnie. “Iyal is a 13 year old who functions cognitively, emotionally and socially like an eight year old. That gap will widen. He’ll never catch up to his chronological age.”

Iyal will never drive or have a regular job. He doesn’t understand money or time. Experts say the transition from adolescence to adulthood is particularly difficult for individuals with FASD. And Chancer won’t be around forever. For as long as they live, the Winokurs hope to make sure there is a 4 Paws dog at Iyal’s side. For now, they cannot conceive of a life without Chancer.

Chancer doesn’t know that Iyal is cognitively impaired. He knows Iyal is his boy. Chancer loves Iyal in a perfect way, with unconditional love beyond what even the family can offer him. Chancer never feels disappointed in or embarrassed by Iyal. On a field between a playground and baseball diamond, you can see them sometimes – the two of them, running, Iyal laughing, both of them sharing a moment of enormous happiness. Just a boy and his dog. ■