

Team Eliot

With two assistance dogs at his side, Eliot is overcoming many challenges and enjoying a newfound freedom to live his life

Eliot is an 18-year-old person with a variety of complex needs, including autism and other mental health issues. To cope with his needs, Eliot, from Dorset, relies on the support of two well-trained assistance dogs, eight-year-old Labradoodle Curlywurly and one-year-old Labrador Rex. These dogs contribute greatly to Eliot's well-being and help him to cope better with everyday life and autism.

Eliot explains how autism affects him. "It affects me socially. I struggle with communication and am a little socially awkward. I get a lot of social anxiety and it affects my communication, so I can struggle to talk sometimes and I'm not very good at texting or Facebook and things.

"And I have sensory issues. I'm very sensitive to light and sounds. I have blue-tinted lenses in my glasses, which help with bright

lights. I always wear headphones and I usually have music playing, but if people are talking to me or I have to hear someone, then my headphones play a noise-cancellation noise, such as white noise, which helps dampen sound.

"I also have social and behavioural challenges. I have problems with people standing behind me. I get anxious when people touch me unexpectedly."

Eliot describes how his two dogs help him.

"Both dogs have given me freedom and saved my life. When I have episodes, they help show me what's real and what's not, and when I have 'meltdowns', they keep me calm. They do so many things for me."

Prior to obtaining Curlywurly, Eliot frequently experienced 'meltdowns' – a powerful response to an overwhelming situation. According to the National Autistic

Society: "Meltdowns are not the only way an autistic person may express feeling overwhelmed. They may also refuse to interact, withdrawing from situations they find challenging or avoiding them altogether."

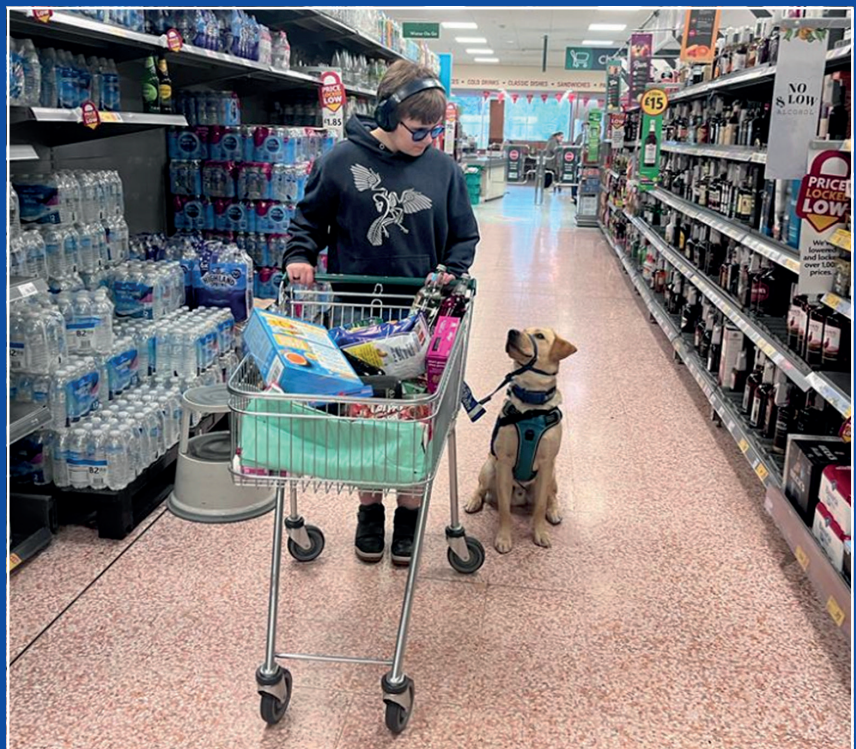
UNDER PRESSURE

Eliot has spent the past three years in general and psychiatric hospitals due to severe mental health difficulties.

"When I came out a year ago, I was so scared of everything and life seemed so, so hard. Then, I started training Curly (whom I've had from a puppy) and then I got Rex and they've both been doing so well and have gotten me through the tough times."

Both dogs have helped diminish 'sensory overload' episodes by doing tasks such as 'deep pressure therapy' among other things.

"Both Curly and Rex lie on





my stomach. They apply some body weight on you," says Eliot. "It's a bit like a pressure blanket. It's quite calming and then I give them a treat."

Eliot says that his dogs help with his mental health conditions, such as eating disorders, OCD, anxiety, complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) and hallucinations. The dogs help by doing things like self-harm interruption and alerts. Rex in particular will 'paw' at Eliot when he begins to self-harm, alerting him that he's doing it without realising.

Three days a week, Eliot (along with Curlywurly) attends Boveridge College, a specialist further-education college, providing day and residential support for young people with autism-spectrum conditions or additional social needs.

"I started last September," says Eliot, "I'm studying maths, English, science, art and animal care. I missed most of my education due to being sectioned. That's why I'm doing the core subjects as well."

With the assistance of Curlywurly and Rex, Eliot is making positive strides in dealing with his many challenges in life. 🐾

