Donna finds independence and confidence again with Ava by her side

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After nearly 12 months without a working guide dog, Donna Purcell finally “has her life back”.

With new guide dog Ava now by her side, Donna has regained a part of herself that was lost after her beloved guide dog Dora died last year.

‘It sounds bizarre, but it feels life-changing,’ says Donna, who is Participant Advocate and Disability Champion for the NDIA and is blind.

‘I feel like I’ve got my freedom and my independence back. I feel so much more confident again.”

‘It’s not just being able to get on the train and have the choice and freedom to go into work, it’s the little things too – like when I'm in the office, if I feel like a coffee or feel like going out and getting some lunch from the cafe downstairs. I can do that.’

As a senior Agency executive and leading advocate in Australia’s disability community, Donna often travels interstate for her work.

But last year her ability to move freely in her community changed.

Donna’s dog Dora, who guided Donna safely around for 5 years, died of lymphoma.

Her death left a gaping hole in Donna’s heart and her confidence.

‘It was the first time in 20 years I didn’t have a guide dog,’ Donna says.

‘I’m not a confident cane user, so for me, it was very difficult. I suddenly lost my independence, and I lost my confidence. I wasn’t doing things I would normally do.

‘Navigating through Central Station was a nightmare. I was relying on my husband and other people a lot more for help.”

Finding the right dog for Donna meant a long search with the help of Guide Dogs NSW/ACT.

‘It’s not about finding any dog, it’s about finding the right dog,’ Donna explains.

‘I travel a lot for my work, so my dog must be comfortable with a lot of travel in busy train stations and airports and small enough to get on planes. Not all dog personalities are going to match that.’

Ava, who graduated from an 18-month training program in July, proved to be the ideal match.

Donna rolled out the red carpet for Ava’s arrival at her home.

‘I was just so, so excited and so full of anticipation, it was an incredibly happy moment,’ Donna says.

‘She just greeted me and snuggled into me straight away. She arrived full of love and has formed a strong bond with me from the beginning, which is beautiful.

‘I genuinely feel there is a strong spirit of both Dora and my previous dog Emily in Ava. There are things she does that are so familiar, and she has such a calm demeanour. She is very special.’

While Donna and Ava are busy travelling locally, they are still learning how to work together as a team.

Soon, they’ll do a trial run at Sydney’s hectic airport before flying interstate for the first time.

Donna is excited about their future together.

‘It is a fantastic feeling,’ Donna says. ‘With Ava, I've got control back of my life because I'm making the decisions and doing what I want to do, and I know I am safe with her by my side.’

Donna is a NDIS participant. Ava has been funded through Donna’s NDIS plan.

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