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Today was our big day: Honey's assessment to be an Outreach therapy dog. Would they think a huge, gangling Great Dane puppy was too big for the job? Or too young? Or too boisterous?

Feeling like a nervous mother taking her child in for a school interview, I led Honey into the SPCA Auckland Animal Village. We were shown into a private room where Honey was allowed to explore and where they could assess her temperament – especially whether she was nervous or anxious in new surroundings.

Half an hour later, the paperwork was all done and we awaited the verdict. The assessor smiled. Honey was stretched out, fast asleep at her feet, snoring softly. Laid-back enough? Er, we think so!

Next it was on to the St John headquarters for more practical tests, such as possessiveness with toys and response to sudden, loud noises such as a dropped bedpan.

Her brow wrinkled as the assessor shouted suddenly and waved her arms around over Honey's head, looming

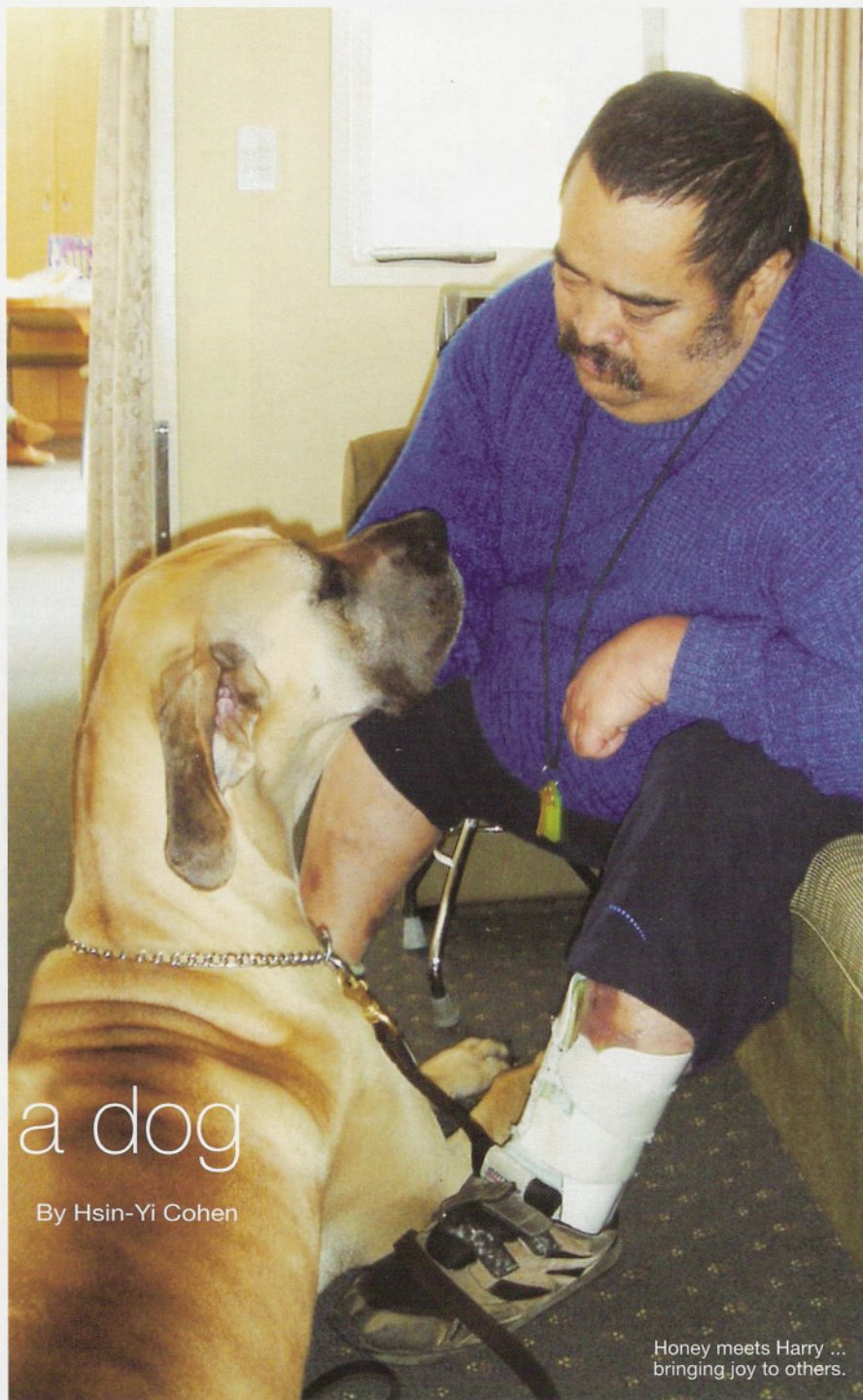
A Honey of a dog

threateningly over her. Honey yawned lazily. What on Earth were these humans doing? They were always strange but this one was really odd.

Honey stood patiently as the human did even more strange things to her, like smacking her rump, pulling her ears and hugging her head. There were also wheelchairs, zimmer frames and walking sticks to get accustomed to.

I watched anxiously but Honey's only response was to wag her tail and grin stupidly. Well, it looked like she passed with flying colours.

Two weeks later, Honey was put to the real test as we went out on our first Outreach visit: a rehabilitation centre specialising in patients with brain and spinal injuries. Honey was a "natural", gently approaching to say hello, placidly



By Hsin-Yi Cohen

Honey meets Harry ... bringing joy to others.

rolling over for tummy rubs, neatly sidestepping wheelchairs and happily offering to shake paws.

She didn't turn a hair when a patient suddenly collapsed on the floor in the throes of a seizure.

By the time we turned to go, Honey had a thriving fan club, a sea of beaming faces, all waving enthusiastically and shouting: "Bye, Honey! Bye, Honey! Come back soon."

We now regularly visit the rehabilitation centre, as well as a rest home where

Honey patiently sits and listens to the residents reminisce about old times. She gently "assists" with afternoon tea. She is adored by patients and staff alike and it is incredibly rewarding to see the patients' faces light up when they see her, their fingers reaching out to touch her soft coat.

And as I look down at my huge Great Dane, I feel inordinately proud that that exasperating, clumsy puppy has matured into this wonderful dog who is giving so much joy to others. 