

DANCING THE

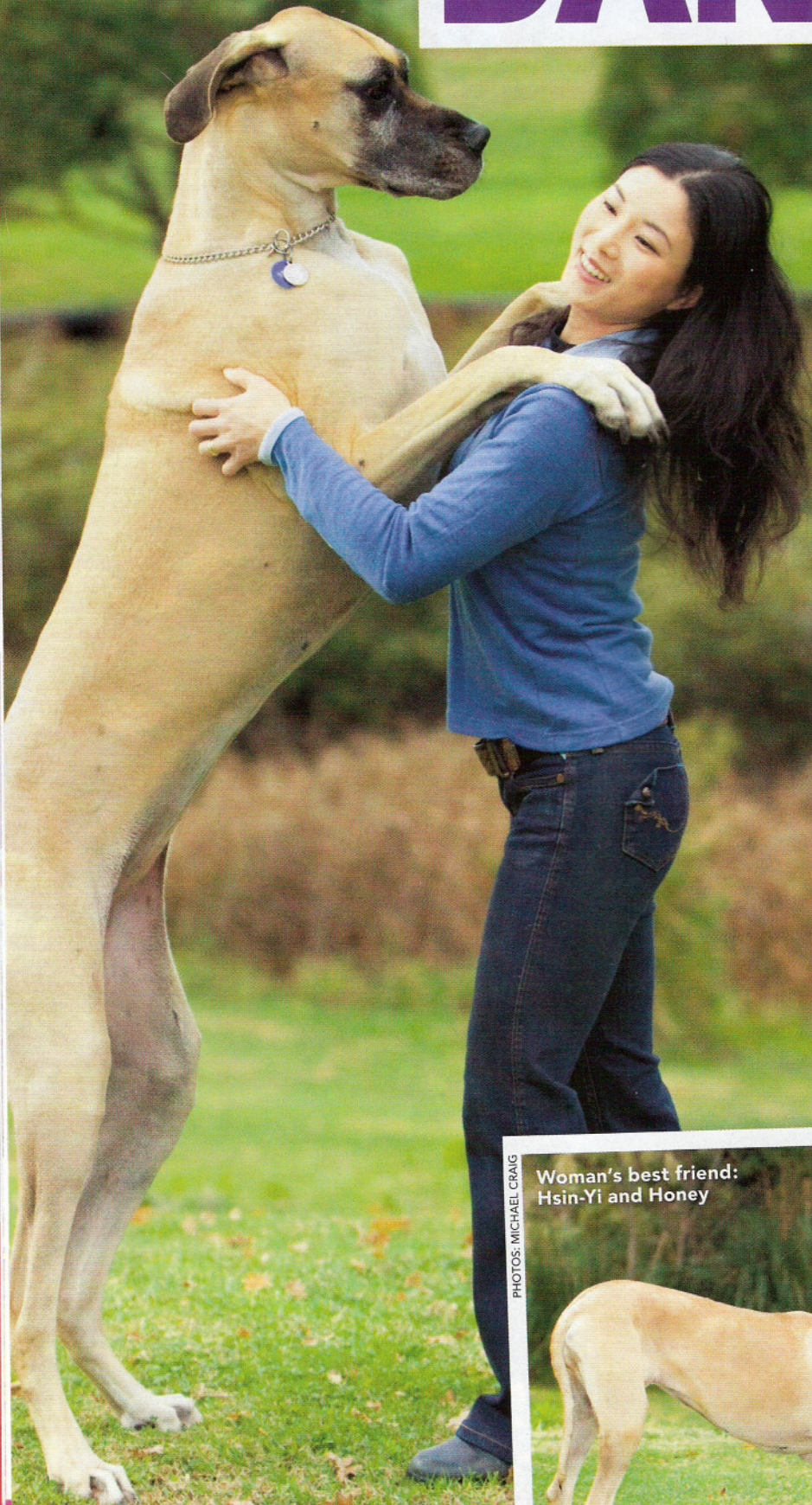
Honey, a 70kg great dane from Auckland, is a canine star with her own website

Flat on her back, as the class of dog owners screamed in horror, Hsin-Yi Cohen wondered if she'd made the biggest mistake of her life. Her seven-month-old great dane puppy had lunged towards a growling toy poodle, dragging her petite owner with her.

"It was the most humiliating moment of my life," says Hsin-Yi (35), of Auckland. "Even though Honey wasn't hurting the poodle, everyone started screaming because she was so much bigger. People were saying that Honey was uncontrollable and a monster. I was crying and we were forced to leave in disgrace."

But Hsin-Yi refused to give up on her wayward pet, who grew to be 70kg, dwarfing her 50kg owner, and today the puppy-school reject has turned her rough start into a successful career as a dancer, photographic model and therapist for disabled people and troubled youth.

For Hsin-Yi, getting a dog of her own was a long-held dream and, after lots of



PHOTOS: MICHAEL CRAIG
Woman's best friend:
Hsin-Yi and Honey



WITH DOGS

research, she knew exactly what kind of dog she wanted. "It had to be a great dane because they're so majestic and powerful, yet gentle and soppy too," she says.

"From day one, I started teaching her things like 'sit' and 'down' and doing loads of socialisation," says Hsin-Yi. "Having waited so long for a dog, I did everything by the book, but after being kicked out of that training class, I lost my confidence."

Desperate to keep going with Honey, Hsin-Yi went for one-on-one sessions with top Auckland animal trainer Flip Calkoen. "I went to him in tears, saying, 'You've got to help me. I've got an aggressive dog!' He took one look at her and laughed."

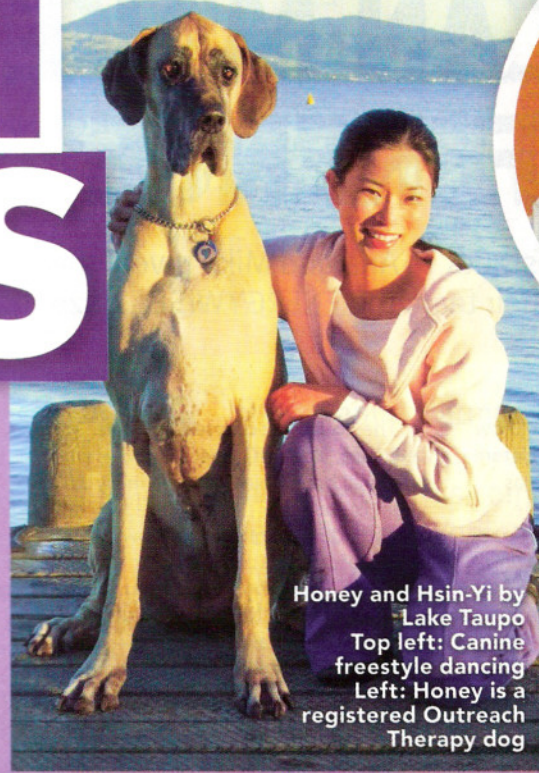
Flip reassured Hsin-Yi that Honey was just excitable and taught Hsin-Yi to use a clicker for obedience training. Whenever Honey had behaved well, Hsin-Yi would reward her with a treat while making the clicker sound.

Just months after the infamous training class incident, Honey and Hsin-Yi were able to walk back into the dog club with their heads held high.

Honey flew through her training with flying colours, and became the first great dane in the country to achieve the Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen Scheme Gold Award. "It recognises dogs that have the training and demeanour to be reliable family members and a part of the community," explains Hsin-Yi.

When Honey was 18 months old, she was registered as an Outreach Therapy dog, having passed a rigorous test involving getting used to noises like the crash of bedpans, as well as wheelchairs and unpredictable human behaviour.

Since then, Honey has been a huge hit at rest homes, rehabilitation centres, and Youth Justice, where her presence brings young offenders out of their shells. "It's good for them to see I can control a 70kg animal without getting violent. Through Honey, they learn about animal welfare and kindness to others."



Honey and Hsin-Yi by Lake Taupo
Top left: Canine freestyle dancing
Left: Honey is a registered Outreach Therapy dog



'It's very flattering

... it's like going out with a celebrity'

When Honey was three, she was ready for another challenge – canine freestyle. The sport involves training dogs to perform tricks and moves with their owners, all choreographed to music – in fact, it's doggie dancing!

"It's usually popular with smaller breeds like border collies," says Hsin-Yi. "People told me a great dane would be too big and clumsy – like dancing with a cow. But for me, it wasn't about winning – it was about spending time with my dog. Their comments just spurred me on to prove them all wrong."

Honey learned bows, twists and turns. To Hsin-Yi's surprise, they found themselves at the National Dog Training Assembly in Auckland – the biggest annual event in New Zealand for dog trainers.

The dynamic duo danced to *Big Spender* by Shirley Bassey, with Honey dressed in a bow tie, and Hsin-Yi as a cabaret girl. During the routine, Honey bowed, marched span, and even smacked Hsin-Yi on the bottom!

"When we won, they had to call my name twice because I didn't believe it," laughs Hsin-Yi. "I was so proud!"

The pair took out first prize in their

division, as well as an award for the best choreography, making Honey the first great dane to win awards for her dancing.

Since then, Hsin-Yi has started Honey's very own blog, bighoneydog.com, which is taking the dog world by storm. Honey's routines are a hit on YouTube, she stars regularly at public events and has been used as a photographic model.

Hsin-Yi, who is a writer and model, loves working with her best mate on shoots.

"If we sit down to eat at a cafe, people will queue up to talk to us and pat her," she smiles. "It's very flattering, but it's like going out with a celebrity!"

And while Honey's manners are always impeccable, sometimes humans aren't quite as responsible. Recently, a toddler jumped on Honey, while a man once tried to lift her up to see how much she weighed! Luckily, the gentle giant took it all in her stride, and Hsin-Yi wouldn't change a thing about her drooling, dancing great dane.

"I think of Honey as my guardian angel," says Hsin-Yi. "Because of her, I have a vast circle of friends and experiences. She has opened up my world."

Bronwyn Marquardt