**More than a man’s best friend**

Angus: Hi I’m Angus Fowler and you’re listening to the Purple Orange Podcast, where we cover issues and stories that matter to the disability community.

This time, April Dwyer, brings us the story of a man who rebuilds his life after an acquired brain injury with the help of two unlikely friends.

\*Dog bark\*

April: Hello! Look at you in play mode!

\*Dog bark\*

Mark: BJ stop

\*Dog bark\*

Mark: Oi!

April: On a big property, north of Adelaide, lives a dog trainer. But he isn’t just any dog trainer.

\*sound change\*

Mark: My name’s Mark Both and this little man here, Buddy Junior is his name, but we nicknamed him BJ. He’s training up to be my new assistant dog.

Mark: BJ come here mate.

April: Mark is getting BJ ready so we can go for a walk.

Mark: BJ come. So just tell him that it’s work mode. OK work. Work.

April: BJ’s a normal puppy, running around and having heaps of fun but as soon as he hears the word work, he calms down. BJ stands still letting Mark put his work vest on.

Mark: All righty. You ready to go to work mate? All right let’s head out.

April: While we’re on our walk, BJ is demonstrating to me how BJ helps him in day to day life.

Mark: The perfect heel position is their shoulder in front of your leg but for an assistant dog, just to be walking and paying attention ahead of me and observing what’s going on around, he has to be in tune with me but also a little bit ahead watching what’s going on in front of us.

April: BJ’s sniffing the ground. It seems like he’s caught a scent but Mark pulls him away quickly.

Mark: He’s not allowed to sniff onto the ground, because once they start smelling and they get onto a scent, then they go off the job. So, I teach him while his harness is on, he’s got to stay in tune.

April: We’re just passing an idling car and BJ is pulling Mark away from it.

Mark: If I ever get wound up and don’t think about stepping in front of a car, he straight away leads me away from it.

Mark: He’s responding to the road crossing. He will not move until that sound happens.

Mark: I had a car crash just down the road from here. All of my frontal lobe got damaged and my brain stem as well. I don’t remember anything from before my injury.

Mark: The next year I fell and I broke my knee cap and that brought on PTSD real bad. I would wake up in the middle of the night, I was just in panic mode, like freaking out. But the moment Buddy would come up to me and paw me in my chest, I would snap out of it.

Mark: I told the psychiatrist about it and I said, “I don’t understand what’s going on.” I said, “I honestly think you’re going to have to take me into a home or something. Like, I’m not right in the head, man.”

Mark: And then he explained to me PTSD and about services dogs. And would I be willing to have Buddy trained as my assistant dog?

April: So Mark entered the world of assistant dogs with Buddy by his side.

April: Mark and Buddy were already closely bonded and training together brought them even closer.

Mark: I remember once I was at my auntie’s tea. And he was just crying and carrying on. So I got up and I walked out and as I got up and I was walking, I felt real faint and all dizzy. He led me outside and then when we got outside I went down to the ground and he lay over the top of me. And he just sat there and lay on me. So he was picking up on me having a panic attack.

Mark: He just knew me through and throughout. I felt so safe.

April: Then, without warning, Buddy passed away.

Mark: He was my life man. I went in a downward spiral for a while. Umm, I just felt like I didn’t feel safe anymore.

April: The memory of Buddy is still strong in Mark’s room.

Mark: All this stuff up here on my wardrobe is all his stuff. That doesn’t get touched. I’ve got a brand new life jacket up there, the bag we’d always use, his treat bag. That teddy bear, that was his teddy bear. And that’s his little box there with his picture on it and his ashes in it.

April: While no one can ever replace Buddy, Mark and BJ are forming a strong connection.

Mark: We have a lot of good moments so we’ll get there too. And there’ll be times when he’ll pick up on something that I remember Buddy doing that for me. But, I mean, he’s only young.

April: Knowing all the ways that Buddy and BJ have helped him, Mark is now forging a career in assistant dog breeding and training. He wants to help crash victims like himself and also veterans.

Mark: People see like yeah, a dog helps people but when you’ve got disability and you’ve got a dog that can help you in ways that you can’t help yourself, it just makes you so independent.

April: Mark loves dogs so much that breeding and training isn’t enough. So he’s also training to become a dog hydrotherapist at Noah’s Crossing.

April: Mark was first introduced to dog hydrotherapy as a client. He and Buddy had already been attending Noah’s Crossing for over a year.

Mark: When I would go there, my half an hour would be up and I would just sit there quietly in the corner and then when she’d be busy I’d quickly go do another lap with him and I’d always try to sneak in as much time as I could to be in the pool with him. Because I just loved it, man. Loved it, loved it. And I loved watching them, what they would do with other dogs, like it just, it fascinated me just watching it.

April: Five months ago, Mark was applying for a job as a dog trainer. He called the head hydrotherapist at Noah’s Crossing, asking for a reference. But she had other ideas.

Mark: She goes, “I want you. I want you to become a hydrotherapist. I want you to come work for me.” I said, “Are you serious? Like, be in the pool rehabilitating dogs?” She goes, “Yeah.”

Mark: I’d been doing it for a year and a half at this stage. And then yeah, so the last, what, four or five months it’s actually getting paid for it.

April: Mark has invited me to Noah’s Crossing to see him in action. He’s so at home in the pool at in tune with the dogs he works with.

Mark: This is the boss’s dog. Her name is Ella. So, in for a fitness swim. So we’ll get her in the water, make sure she’s all relaxed, all happy, and when she’s tells me when she’s ready, we’ll float her out.

April: I can really tell that he just loves this work.

Mark: Now we’re just putting a life jacket on her. People think dogs are natural born swimmers but some of them are not. Most of them are not. You’ve got to teach them how to swim.

April: Since his accident, Mark has found a new passion and turned it into a career. And it’s really starting to take him places. This year alone, he is going t be travelling all over Australia, and even overseas to learn everything he can about dog training and hydrotherapy.

Mark: From two-and-a-bit years ago, lying in a bed, not even being able to push a button on a remote to travelling the world working and training my own dogs, within a period of a couple of years. I’m pretty proud of that.

Angus: We’ve all heard that dogs are man’s best friend. But for Mark, and many people all over the world, they are so much more. They are independence, support and safety.

Angus: If you would like to learn more about Mark’s work, follow him on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/mark.both.1671](http://www.facebook.com/mark.both.1671)

Angus: If you want to know more about assistant dogs, you can find links to resources at [www.healthdirect.gov.au/assistance-dogs](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/assistance-dogs).

Angus: If you would like more stories of people in the disability community, follow us on Facebook and Twitter at JFAPurpleOrange, on Instagram at A Moment of Me, or visit our website at www.purpleorange.org.au.