

HOW DID YOU AND JYMBI MEET?

I was working with Kalwun Health Service at the time I began working with Jymbi. My work was solely the with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community within the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Team. I wanted to work in a way that helped people to connect with myself and the team in a way that created a feeling of safety. Jymbi was, and continues to be hugely successful in creating connections and feelings of calmness.

After I had the idea of working with a Therapy Dog, I put a proposal together and presented to the management at Kalwun. They were totally supportive of the idea right from the beginning. Jymbi maintains great relationships with lots of people from the early days at Kalwun.

I did lots of research and found a breeder just outside of Port Macquarie who understood the importance of temperament, and who had a good understanding of the work we wanted to do. She had planned to keep Jymbi for breeding, but given the work we wanted to do, also wanted to support us. My sister and I drove to collect Jymbi soon after, and met with Jymbi, his mum, dad and grandmother. It was love at first sight!! This was just prior to Christmas in 2014, so we had a couple of weeks off to settle Jymbi in. He started coming to work part-time early on, and settled into Kalwun beautifully.

Jymbi's name – Jymbilung – was decided by Aunty Tracey Ritson who was the Manager of the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Team at the time. It is a Yugembeh language name which means friend. We thought that to be appropriate.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A SERVICE DOG?

There's a great deal of confusion about the terms 'service dog', 'assistance dog', 'emotional support dog', 'medical alert dog' and 'therapy dog'. Here we go:

Emotional support animals are not legally recognised under Australian law as they are in other countries such as the USA. Emotional support animals are regarded to provide 'emotional support' to people – they are not trained to perform any specific tasks, it is their presence that is helpful and supportive.

The terms service dog and assistance dog are used interchangeably and refer to dogs trained to mitigate the impact of a disability on a specific person, who is their handler. Generally, in Australia we use the term assistance dog, whilst in the USA the term service dog is used. Disability refers to both physical and psychiatric disability and can include disabilities such as visual impairment, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and autism spectrum disorder. Assistance dogs can support people in numerous ways. For example, a Veteran with PTSD who may experience terrifying nightmares may have their dog trained to wake them from their sleep. People with extreme anxiety or panic attacks may have their dog trained to interrupt the behaviour associated with the panic and assist the handler to sooth reduce emotional arousal.

Increasingly we are also seeing the training and use of 'medical alert dogs' in Australia. Medical alert dogs are used by people with Type 1 diabetes and seizures and alert the handler to changes in their medical condition, allowing them to take medication, or get to a place of safety prior to a seizure. I've observed a seizure alert dog at work, and it was incredible to see the dog bark a couple of minutes prior to seizure and this allow her handler to sit herself in a place of safety. Prior to working with her assistance dog, this young woman had experienced numerous injuries as a consequence of falling prior to seizure. Not only did her dog prevent injury, but she also significantly improved the young woman's quality of life, as she was able to go to the shops, exercise and visit friends.

All 'assistance/service dogs' must sit and pass a test called the Public Access Test. In Queensland people and organisations that perform this test must be government accredited. The test requires a high level of obedience. Assistance dogs have the right to access public spaces such as shops, public transport and housing.

A therapy dog is trained to engage with many people, their handlers do not possess a disability and the dogs do not have public access rights. Currently in Australia we do not have a governing body assessing temperament, obedience or suitability of dog to be therapy dogs – the area is self-governing.

In Australia, one of the most highly regarded training programs for Therapy Dogs is Lead the Way which is based in Melbourne. Jymbi and I have completed their Introductory and Advanced training and have completed the re-accreditation process as recommended in their protocols. We will again be heading off on a road trip in September this year for re-assessment. Re-assessment occurs every two years and involves a temperament assessment of Jymbi – ensuring he isn't reactive to noises, people and tricky situations, has a high level of obedience and has a strong working relationship with me. My handling skills are assessed and issues in regards to ethics, zoonoses and recent research is discussed.

WHAT BREED IS JYMBI?

Jymbi is a Groodle – standard poodle X golden retriever. I met his dad – he was a HUGE dark brown standard poodle, his mum looked very much like him and I also met his grandmother (mother's mum) who was blond ☺

HOW IS THIS HELPFUL TO YOUR PATIENTS?

Jymbi helps people to feel relaxed. He generally lays on the couch, welcoming pats and cuddles. This process reduces heart rate and blood pressure and promotes a state of connection. Sometimes coming to see a psychologist and speak about deeply personal or difficult issues can create fear and anxiety. Jymbi helps reduce those feelings.

He also helps with therapeutic exercises – such as helping a young boy to practice using a strong assertive voice and assertive body language through training Jymbi. He helps us to laugh during sessions – as he is often quite amusing...

DID YOU ONLY SEE PEOPLE WITH JYMBI?

Some people don't like dogs, or don't feel comfortable with dogs. Jymbi doesn't attend those sessions. Generally, he attends all other sessions. If the weather is really rainy, he may stay at home, because it's logistically too difficult to keep him dry. We don't work full time, so he doesn't work too hard.

People often ask how he lets me know if he needs to go to the toilet... we have a morning routine which involves a lovely 'sniff walk' for Jymbi. Dogs love to sniff and they need time to do this for their happiness and wellbeing. We have time for this each day, which also allows time for Jymbi to 'do his business'. During breaks in our day, and sometimes during sessions, we go for a walk which allows time for Jymbi to go to the toilet. He's never had a toileting accident at work. If he is unsettled during the day, I will know there's something going on, and we can take a walk.

WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE FUTURE FOR YOU TWO?

I'd like to do some training with other therapists in working with their Therapy Dogs. I've learnt so much through working with Jymbi, I'd like to train and share with others some of the tricks, challenges and joys of Animal Assisted Therapy.

I'd also like to get my group program going for people with social anxiety/agoraphobia. I've written up a group program to help people challenge themselves to get out of the house and get to the park, to their local shops and to the beach. I'm excited and very keen to get that going.

I'm also incorporating biofeedback into our sessions – it's a very exciting process involving monitoring a client's electrodermal activity in their fingers with a little device to detect changes in physiological stress. We observe those changes in real time on an app on the iPad, and engage in patting Jymbi, breathing and relaxation exercises to learn how to reduce and manage the stress response. People can see immediately the impact they can have on their stress levels – it's empowering and fun. The feedback so far has been phenomenal, so we will be further developing our biofeedback activities.

WHAT CONDITIONS HAVE THE BEST RESPONSES WITH JYMBI?

I think for people who experience anxiety, stress and trauma Jymbi is perfect. He is great with young people, who may not feel comfortable coming along to see someone initially because he just helps to create a feeling of calmness.

WITH SOME SERVICE DOGS YOU AREN'T ALLOWED TO CUDDLE THEM OR TOUCH WITHOUT PERMISSION, IS THIS THE SAME WITH JYMBI?

Service and assistance dogs are working when they are with their handlers. Jymbi's job is basically about connecting with people – which he does brilliantly with great enthusiasm. If people see Jymbi wandering around MOM, please approach because he loves the attention. In fact, Jymbi thinks there's a problem if people don't stop to admire and give a pat!

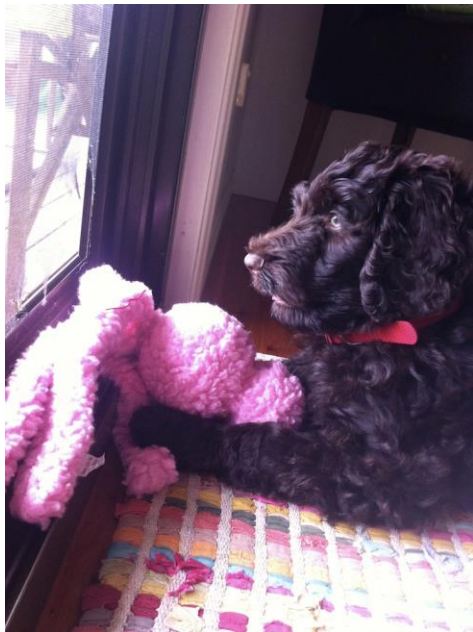
Facebook – Jymbilung Therapy Dog

Photos

First day at work



11 weeks



After passing Therapy Dog Assessment

