

EASING THE PAIN

Animals don't judge, criticise, or blame. In this age of Aids, dogs often provide the only opportunity of a relationship without prejudice

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Cary Ross and his dog Kid are New York originals. At 43 and seven years old respectively, both are enjoying the more settled routines of middle-age. They live in Greenwich Village on Manhattan, in the heart of the gay community, though Cary originally comes from across Hudson Bay on Staten Island. Dog ownership came as a surprise to Cary: "I've always loved dogs, but living here in New York, I never thought I should have one. I thought it was cruel to keep a dog in a small apartment."

At that point, Kid, a generous-natured black Labrador, interrupted. She ran across the flat to pick up her lead ready for her next walk. With the exercise and care she gets, Cary need not be concerned. Kid is never left on her own during the day - her job is to be with him.

Cary went blind when he suffered detached retinas in both eyes - a congenital condition doctors

could do little to treat. "When I had a cane, a lot of my friends couldn't handle it. Some kept away; perhaps they were worried I might ask them for something." But having a dog changed their reactions. "When I got Kid, they started coming back," he said.

Kid and Cary were a perfect match. Unusually for guide dogs, Cary was Kid's second owner. Kid's first owner treated her as though she were a cane – attempting to put her in a corner when she had finished working. In September 1989, Cary's application for a guide dog was accepted and Kid found a new home on Christopher Street.

URGENT NEED

At that time, Cary's partner, Randy, began to need regular hospital care for complications arising from his infection with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). As a guide dog, Kid was one of the few animals allowed into the hospital and she was an instant hit with other patients suffering from complications arising from Aids.

"We were in and out of hospital the whole time and Kid was really popular. One day, I was visiting another friend who had lymphoma. I took her off the harness and we were talking. Later, I noticed she wasn't there. She had sneaked off and was doing a ward round. We should have put a stethoscope on her! People called her into their rooms to pet her." Initially, some nurses were unhappy about having a dog on the ward but she was a real hit with patients. "Randy would ask her to climb up on the bed and she'd lie against his legs to keep him warm."

The only people who were afraid of her were some drug users. "They had probably learned to be careful when they saw a dog," Cary said.

From his hospital visits, Cary discovered that many people with Aids suffered further emotional distress by having to give up their pets as it became harder and harder to ensure they were properly cared for. Responding to this, a group of volunteers, including Steve Kohn, set up the Pet Owners with Aids Resource (POWARS).

"We had identified an urgent need," Steve said. "Soon we had several hundred requests for help. Many people with Aids were suffering bereavement at the prospect of losing the dog, cat or pet that they loved as they found themselves physically unable to care for them.

This was a terrible emotional burden coming at the worst possible time. The continuing love of a dog can be a great solace when so much else seems to be changing."

It's a view that Cary, who has been HIV positive for many years, bears out. "Whenever I get a little sad or wallow in self-pity, thinking about all the people who have gone, Kid is always there. She might be sound asleep, but she senses the change in me and comes to rest her head on my leg – even when I've been crying silently."

Despite his modesty, Cary is not given to self-pity. His sense of loss is borne from a series of experiences few people have had to endure.

"The friends I didn't lose through my blindness I have pretty much lost to Aids, but Kid keeps me going. Having her gives me responsibility. Without her, I may be tempted to stay in for days at a time, but I know I have to take her out. I have to care for her – she is my eyes.

"Kid is a lesbian dog. She loves real women. God help any woman in a dress because Kid's nose goes straight under it. She likes men, but she *loves* women."

Cary has succeeded in keeping active. A former social worker, he also continues a career making videos of cabaret artists. "I filmed Bette Midler back in '82. She was very boring – not at all what you might expect. From the way she treated me, she was already on her way to bitchdom."

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Kid disappeared at this point to return with a pair of Christmas antlers and sunglasses. "Dogs are great fun but I wouldn't recommend them to all people with Aids. Don't get involved with dogs unless you really are a dog-lover," Cary emphasised. "They need a lot of attention; they need to be house trained and you need to be able to make sure they can be looked after whatever happens to you."

The beauty of Cary's work and of organisations like POWARS is that they have enabled dogs and people to remain together despite Aids.

"Dogs are really showing us the way. Many people continue to run from HIV and Aids but a dog will love you whatever you suffer. They don't blame you for being sick and in this, they've shown greater humanity than many of our species." ■