



GIVE A DOG A BONE

THE UNIQUE, AWARD-WINNING ANIMAL CHARITY

Gill Sherry

This is the second time I've visited Give a Dog a Bone in Troon. It's also the second time I've been welcomed by Stanley the dachshund and his owner, Jennifer. Both times I'm offered a cup of tea, served not just with a smile but also a plate of biscuits. This warm welcome is something the charity's founder, Louise Russell, has strived to perfect.

"Our calling card is kindness," Louise declares. "As soon as you come in you get offered a cup of tea. I think for lonely people, potentially it can be quite a scary thing to come to a new place where you don't know anybody. We've got a really short window to make people feel seen and valued and it's about capturing that moment. The dogs are brilliant for that because they're great ice breakers."

Louise set up the charity ten years ago to offer financial support to the over 60s to enable them to afford a rescue pet companion.

"It's a win-win because the person gets a friend and the animal gets a home. The whole charity is about tackling loneliness for older adults via animal companionship."

One thing Louise soon realised, however, was that not everyone who would like a pet, is actually able to have one.

"Maybe somebody is not mobile enough or they've moved into sheltered accommodation and not allowed to take an animal. Some say they don't want to outlive an animal or don't want to go through the heartbreak of losing one."

This led to the charity expanding to include community spaces in Troon, Glasgow and Alloa.

"The magic of the community spaces is that people can come in and spend time with dogs without the responsibility of having their own. We've got a team of companionship dogs."

Companionship dogs, like Stanley, belong to staff and volunteers. There is always at least one dog in each of the community spaces, allowing people to come along and spend time with the dog and to relax in a safe environment. Group dog walks are also arranged.

"It's about giving them exposure to dogs and the opportunity to walk a dog without the responsibility, and always with a safe pair of hands next to them."

But there is so much more to the community spaces than four-legged companionship, as Louise explains: "What we're trying to do is encourage people to leave their homes and come back into the community. When you retire, you can lose a bit of your identity and start to retreat. We try to give them a hook. It might be the dogs, it might be just coming to the centre to have a blether, or it might be the activities that we put on."

One such activity is a Wellbeing Choir. I was able to enjoy the choir's rendition of 'My Guy' as I drank my tea. Other activities include Mindfulness and a Spanish class.

"The whole premise is that we don't charge for activities or tea and coffee. It's about accessibility for older adults."

That said, Louise is keen to point out that anybody of any age is welcome.

"What I've learned over the years is that loneliness is not something that happens when you reach a certain age."

Louise's compassion is obvious, even more so when she explains how Give a Dog a Bone came about.

"I was working in a very corporate job and was approaching a big birthday. I felt a calling to do something and became a serial volunteer for various different charities. Helping others was my passion and it was igniting something in me after almost two decades in a corporate role. I'm an animal person and an older adult person so it was about what I could do to make a difference."

For the first five years, Louise continued to work full-time, running the charity as a volunteer. Eventually, though, she was unable to ignore its potential.

"I knew if I was able to spend my working hours on my seeds, it would just grow."

And grow it did. Five years ago, Louise was the only employee. The charity now employs a team of nine. Last year, over 12,500 people came through its doors across the three community spaces.

"We're a relatively young charity," says Louise. "To have a footfall of 12,500 last year is phenomenal. To me, that shows there's a demand for what we've got on offer."

Not only is there a demand, there is also validation in the number of awards the charity has received. Give a Dog a Bone won the Pride of Scotland Community Hero Award in 2022. It was also winner of a Special Recognition Award at The People's Pet Awards London in the same year. Most recently, they were nominated for the Animal Charity Team of the Year Award.

The most important support, however, comes from the local community. As Louise explains: "People in their 70s or 80s, they are our best PR ever! They talk positively about their experience. Also, local people donate biscuits, it's amazing. That's one of the unseen ways that the community of Troon helps us."

Despite this much appreciated support, Louise acknowledges that some people are still unaware of the charity's purpose or, indeed, its existence.

"We've been in Troon since November 2018... but we're still trying to demystify the concept. We're quite an unusual charity. For us to disarm people right away is really important... to make them realise it wasn't a mistake to come in, but it was actually a good thing and they'll come back"

Many of those who do come back are regular visitors and are well known to Louise and her staff.

"We have people coming in several times a week. It's different to sitting in a café on their own. They can come in and get some company. It's all about confidence and self-esteem. It's about enabling and facilitating people to make connections in their community."

And Give a Dog a Bone is an important part of that community.

"We know our regulars. We're the sort of charity where if somebody doesn't come in this week, we start to worry about them. We'll pick up the phone and make sure they're okay. Sometimes that can prove vital. We know our regulars and we know their patterns. We've got our eyes and ears open."

The benefits to the older adults who choose to take advantage of the charity's community spaces or financial assistance are obvious, and it's clearly rewarding for Louise and her team. Which just leaves the dogs...

"The dogs love coming to work!" says Louise. "It gives them more quality of life because they're stimulated all the time. These wee doggies get to do something meaningful and genuinely make a difference to people's lives."

Not forgetting, of course, the rescue dogs who, thanks to the financial assistance provided by Give a Dog a Bone, are able to find their new forever home. But the help doesn't stop there.

"We try to help people who would love a wee pet but finance is the barrier to stop them. The help we provide is about sustaining. We pay a contribution towards their insurance costs. We've also got pet food banks at each of our three community spaces."

Since its inception ten years ago, Give a Dog a Bone has helped thousands of animals and older adults to have a happier life together. As for Louise, she considers herself equally fortunate.

"I feel privileged every day. It's my passion and it's really rewarding."

For more information, visit www.giveadogabone.net.

