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Lucy what's not to love about her?

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NAKED CITY



JOHN SILVESTER

Lucy – what's not to love about her?

This labrador has a knack for calming traumatised people.

was in a waiting room at the Office of Public Prosecutions when the subject of this column wandered in with a relaxed look on her face and gently gave me her business card. Nothing unusual in that, except Lucy is a three-year-old chocolate labrador.

The OPP houses more than just stern-faced lawyers who demand the death penalty for speeding tickets. It has a program using dogs to help calm traumatised witnesses giving evidence in court cases.

The court system has slowly realised there is a duty not only to search for justice but to protect victims from being further traumatised by the very system they turn to for help. Dogs do more than dig holes, round up sheep and wag their tails. Many breeds help people in need – and we are not talking about St Bernard snow rescue dogs that offer a tot of brandy to warm you up in a blizzard.

(Disclosure: In the view of this reporter there are only two types of people. Those who like dogs and psychopaths.) Dogs brighten the mood in aged care homes, assist traumatised first responders and ex-servicemen and are welcomed into hospitals for patients receiving end-of-life care.

Victims engagement co-ordinator Julie Morrison is in charge of the OPP program, and you could not find a more passionate advocate for the use of dogs in the court process. A former teacher and human resources executive, Morrison has a background in training and competing dogs.

"In 2017 we started a pilot program

using a dog for half a day a week. It was supposed to go 12 weeks but after six weeks we knew we were on a winner."

The feedback from witnesses, lawyers and police is overwhelmingly positive. "She's a lifesaver. She is amazing. Holding the lead really helped to ground me. I took my shoes off so I could feel her at my feet," says one witness.

"All of the witnesses commented on how much they loved having her around as a source of comfort during what was a fairly stressful few days for them," says an OPP social worker.

Assistance Dogs Australia has helped people with restricted mobility, autism and PTSD. The dogs have been sent to schools to lower stress during exams.

At a funeral the other day an ex-policeman suffering from PTSD was in a pew, clearly distressed. His companion dog stepped up, placing paws on both the man's knees and looking directly into his eyes. The man gained comfort by burying his head in the dog's fur.

The funeral was for Ron Fenton, a policeman shot on duty who later suffered terribly from PTSD. He said he would have taken his own life if not for Yogi, his trauma dog, trained by a Bathurst Prison inmate.

In 2019 Morrison won a Churchill Fellowship to study the use of dogs in the US and Canadian criminal justice systems. She says the dogs in North America have 26 different roles, from the crime scene to the court. "At the Las Vegas mass shooting [in 2017 a lone gunman killed 60 and wounded 411 people] six dogs were sent to the MGM Casino to assist witnesses. "They can go to a crime scene and one dog can help a witness through the whole process."

She says they are also used at natural disasters such as wildfires, an initiative

that could easily be adopted here. Canadian police use them at crime scenes, hospital casualty wards and serious accident spots.

Lucy, the first full-time court dog in Australia, underwent eight months' training at the Southern Queensland Correctional Centre as part of the Pups in Prison program. Her handler was a female inmate serving time for murder.

Morrison says: "[The inmate] is the sweetest, loveliest lady. When Lucy graduated, she said 'I know I have hurt a lot of people and by now helping people it makes me hate myself a little less.'"

Last year the OPP expanded its program at Child Witness Services with Kiki, a black Labrador. She was trained by the same inmate. (The assistance dog programs in NSW and Queensland prisons consistently receive rave reviews for assisting the community and lowering recidivism rates. The prisoner who trained Yogi for Ron Fenton is now a successful plumber in Sydney. That a similar program has not been adopted in Victoria beggars belief.)

The dogs are truly remarkable. A Canadian handler reports he can walk into a class of kids and the dog will head to the one who has been traumatised.

Labradors are the perfect fit for court work for they like people and are relaxed by nature. Like newspaper reporters they are highly social, low in energy and love free food.

Lucy has a bag of tricks; she can bow on command, play bowls, and turn the pages of a book. She is so popular she now has her own Instagram page, @courtdoglucy.

Cute, but hardly likely to make a huge difference to a traumatised victim of crime. The real work is about trust, companionship and the dog's ability to



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pick up on the emotions of the witness.

Lucy meets the subject away from the court to establish a relationship. Morrison says the witness is encouraged to hold the lead as if Lucy is their dog and not just a visitor. She will lie quietly, leaning slightly against the person's leg. The victim can lean down to stroke her or take a shoe off to rub her with a foot.

She is more than friendly; she has the capacity to bond quickly and be a friend. For victims of sex crimes, the process of recalling the crime in front of strangers and then to be questioned in excruciating detail can be a raw and bruising experience.

Repeatedly witnesses say having Lucy means having a friend in their corner. As one young victim said: "I'm special 'cause I've got a dog."

Lucy is chilled – sometimes too chilled. More than once during evidence there has been an unexpected background noise.

"She is a bit of a snorer," says Morrison. Sometimes a witness, particularly when that witness is a child, can become engaged with Lucy to the point of distraction. Then the dog is left in the waiting room to act as a companion during court breaks.

Since the Court Dog Program started four years ago the dogs have supported almost 300 witnesses, nearly half of them children. The OPP has made 250 requests to magistrates and judges to allow Lucy and Kiki to accompany a witness giving evidence. There have been only five refusals.

Most involve remote video evidence, where the victim is kept apart from the court and the alleged offender. Lucy is also the first dog allowed into the witness box during testimony. She even bows to

the judge. Morrison says all parties in the court see the value in support dogs. Less stress means fewer court breaks and allows trials to proceed more smoothly.

While Lucy's workload is full-time, occasionally during COVID she was able to support frightened child victims who police needed to interview.

In a suburban station Lucy was sent to support one of three children. When Morrison and the dog were about to leave, a detective approached in desperation. "She had a five-year-old boy who was totally withdrawn and asked if we could assist," she says. "Lucy walked in and within 10 minutes the little tacker was making a full disclosure."

The detective said she had never seen such a transformation.

Courts and law offices are intimidating at the best of times and for a victim, unaccustomed to the austere nature of the justice system, it can all be too hard.

Gabby, the victim of a serious sexual assault, felt the walls closing in when she sat in the OPP waiting room: "I felt like I was heading to the principal's office."

Then she was introduced to Lucy. "I immediately felt calmer because this majestic, beautiful dog was there for me."

Sitting in the interview room, Gabby was asked if she was thirsty. "Lucy went to the fridge and got me a bottle of water. I couldn't believe it.

"I have a strong bond with Lucy and things became a lot easier when I relaxed. She knew when I was anxious and would sit there licking my hand or putting her head on my knee. She could pick up my emotions."

Even when she was alone, "I would look at her business card and talk to it. I thought, 'we can do this together'. If not for the dog, I wouldn't have given evidence."

Morrison says Lucy and Kiki's job is not just to support witnesses during court but to minimise ongoing trauma by lowering stress levels. One tactic is to give witnesses a wristband from Lucy saying "You are pawsome".

There was one young witness who didn't seem that taken with the dog. Three months after the trial her parents rang: "She was beside herself because she had broken her bracelet. We sent her another one."

Lucy and Julie Morrison will be online in a webinar on Thursday, May 19, at 2pm as part of Law Week.

'If not for the dog, I wouldn't have given evidence.'

Gabby, sexual assault victim.



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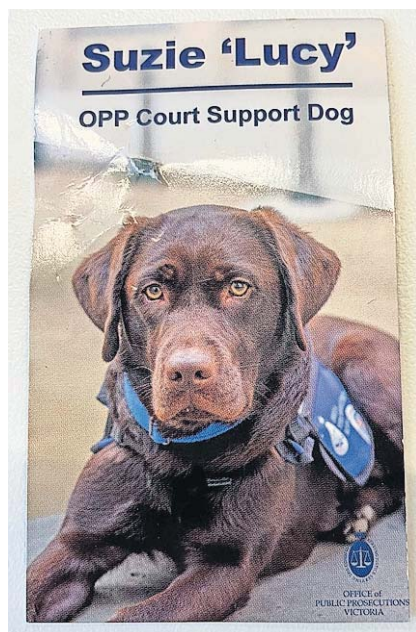
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Support dog Lucy with Gabby, who found her presence calming and comforting. Picture: Eddie Jim



Lucy's business card, with teeth marks.