

# CANINE CARE

Lauren McGrow

She had wild orange hair, a deep throaty voice and spoke in clipped, upper-class British tones. Matilda came to The Women's Space to receive support with a housing issue, get some food and look up information on the Internet. She was such an unusual character and we took a liking to her immediately, listening to the amazing stories she told us about her life. Before long we were drawn into Matilda's world, especially when it came to the dogs. Matilda was a dog breeder and took great delight in showing us photos of her beloved creatures. She even brought a couple of her pets to the house and we loved patting and playing with them. Soon Matilda was convinced that we needed a 'therapy dog' here at The Women's Space, but I was not so sure. Who would look after it? I was afraid that the responsibility would be too great for our team, especially me! Before long Matilda was homeless; it was only a temporary situation, but still an incredibly difficult time for her. One morning she came down after sleeping in a local refuge. She had a small ball of shivering fluff tucked into her pocket, a female puppy six weeks old, which she wanted to donate to The Women's Space. We, in turn, were horrified and enchanted but quickly taken in by this vulnerable and extremely cute little dog. Yes, of course we would look after her!

It is hard to believe now, but that small decision opened up an encouraging and amazing aspect of ministry that we could not have foreseen. Our dog 'Luci' has become a key element in our work together here at The Women's Space. Here are a couple of highlights:

On one occasion while visiting a local parlour, we met two young ladies on their second night working as prostitutes. Roxy and May were 18 and 19 years old respectively. They were related and have been great friends for many years. Both girls used to work in massage but they moved into prostitution, thinking there might be more money and hopefully, better working conditions. Neither was currently using drugs. We spent a good part of the evening with them both and talked at length regarding personal choices, family history and previous job experiences. What opened the discussion though, and gave us an opportunity to connect so strongly, was the outgoing nature of our fluffy little puppy. We stayed with the girls while Luci played and frolicked in their arms and they were delighted. During the course of the conversation, we were able to provide positive support as well as a listening ear. It seemed to be a well-timed connection giving us the opportunity to provide key intervention, as no one in their immediate families knew about the work they were doing.

On another morning at The Women's Space, Katie came in and reported to us that she had been with a client the night before and he had given her a tablet, which she took. Her next memory was of waking up in hospital early that morning, with all her



**"All people & animals are under your care"** Psalm 36:6b (CEV)

possessions and clothing gone, having been severely raped. She was hurt, vulnerable and still feeling the effects of the drug. As soon as she walked in the door, our puppy cuddled up to her and spent the morning sitting next to Katie on the couch. As she stroked the puppy and enjoyed her embraces, Katie reported the soothing effect it had on her. It was amazing – as we could not have orchestrated this – but the dog's behaviour was timely and perfect.

There have been many other examples. We usually take the dog with us on night outreach – she is a comforting presence in a harsh environment. Here at the house, Luci is also a regular who greets everyone at the door. She can often start the discussion when women are unable to talk about things or unwilling to open up. We are thrilled by her love and acceptance of everyone we meet and Luci doesn't mind if any of our visitors are dirty, smelly, drug-affected or emotionally disturbed! She is an example of Grace at its finest! We could never have known that the small gift of a dog (which at first appeared to be a burden) could turn into such a great blessing. And in a place like The Women's Space, it is the small things and fragile beginnings that often hold the most meaning.