**Gertie’s Law**

**Court Dogs: Lucy & Coop**

**Julie Morrison**

I’m Julie Morrison, and I’m the Victims Engagement Coordinator at the Office of Public Prosecutions.

**Evan Martin**

I met with Julie last year to talk about a unique program run by the OPP.

**Julie Morrison**

In September 2017, we introduced a pilot program, a Court Support Dog Program, into the OPP. It was the first time it had been done in Australia.

The purpose is basically to provide a support mechanism to vulnerable people going through the court process, and it’s a support mechanism that, I guess, humans can’t provide. You know, humans can’t provide physical contact, we can’t provide that unconditional quiet support, but dogs can.

**Evan Martin**

Julie found a dog, named Coop, who, like most employees, started off on probation - a half-day, once a week.

**Julie Morrison**

We realised within about four weeks that the program had a lot of validity to it and a lot of merit and was going to stay. So, then in 2018, we expanded the program to two full days a week. And in May of this year, we got our own dog who now - Lucy - works full time with us.

So, the role of Lucy is to accompany people as they wait around before they give evidence, and also as they’re actually giving evidence. So, her role, basically, is just to lie at their feet like she’s doing at the moment. People can pat her, they can interact physically with her. I’ve had quite a few people say they take their shoes off so they can feel her through their feet. And even just holding the lead is a really powerful connection between the person and the dog.

**Evan Martin**

I’m Evan Martin and this is Gertie’s Law.

Anybody who’s spent time at the court knows how onerous it can be listening to the stories that come through this place. So, today, we’re taking a break from the sadness, death and devastation, and bringing you a short episode about one of the more uplifting aspects of court life.

Dogs.

**Evan Martin**

We’re working in the legal sector here, so there must be some evidence backing up the benefits to having dogs in court?

**Julie Morrison**

The science behind why it works - and for those people who are dog lovers, we know that dogs make us feel good, but the science behind it is that when you go through stress, we have heightened levels of cortisol in our system, and cortisol raises our blood pressure and our heart rate - all those horrible symptoms of stress that freak us out and stop us functioning effectively.

Studies have shown, though, that when we’re in the presence of a quiet, calm, sleeping dog, there’s an increase in another hormone called oxytocin. Now, oxytocin actually combats the effects of cortisol to reduce heart-rate and blood pressure.

So, there’s actually a scientific reason why, when dogs are around us and they’re quiet and relaxed, we actually begin to feel less stressed.

So, the idea of the program is to take some of that stress out of the very, very stressful court process that, no matter what we do, we know is going to be stressful for people.

So, not only are we making people feel better, but we’re actually helping them to give their evidence which, in the court system, is a win-win all round, because if we can help people tell their story, whatever their story is, it’s got to be good for the system.

**Evan Martin**

One big proponent of the program is criminal judge Justice Champion. In 2017, before being appointed to the court, he was the Director of Public Prosecutions. He approved the Court Support Dog Program.

**Justice Champion**

I spoke to the people at the Office of Public Prosecutions about it and immediately thought it was a project that should be supported. Anything that might enable victims of crime to give better evidence in a courtroom or to help them manage their journey through the criminal justice system seemed to me to be a project that was really worth looking at.

**Evan Martin**

And it’s not just a personal or moral reason to support witnesses. There’s a clear benefit to the court when witnesses and victims aren’t stressed in the courtroom?

**Justice Champion**

Oh, that’s absolutely right.

My experience over the years will tell me that if you reduce anxiety and you can reduce the stress of giving evidence, you are likely to get a better quality of evidence, which will mean a potentially better outcome for everybody. A fair outcome for the person giving the evidence, but also a fairer outcome for the person that’s before the court.

We’ve got to understand that a courtroom for most people is a very stressful experience. People are unfamiliar, they have to give their stories, usually in front of perhaps 10 or 20 people who are all strangers. It’s not surprising that people find that an incredibly anxious and difficult experience.

**Evan Martin**

What kind of impact did the program have?

**Justice Champion**

What I think we noticed very quickly was that there was a great deal of support from the victims and the complainants and the relatives that were coming into the building, and news started to travel very quickly around the building and around the lawyers that the presence of the dog was having a very positive impact on the people that the lawyers were dealing with.

What I hadn’t anticipated was the impact on staff. When the dog came into the building, there just seemed to be a change in mood, very quickly, around staff. You’d see staff members sort of coming around, poking their head in and having a look, seeing what’s going on, wanting to pat the dog.

So, I think that that’s a sort of collateral benefit of having a dog of this kind engaging with staff, because we do have to be mindful of the welfare of our staff, not only from the point of view of prosecutors, but also staff within the court system who have to deal with very traumatic material, and anything that is able to assist people navigate that sort of material in a safe way, I think, has amazing potential benefits.

**Evan Martin**

I think it’s fair to say that Justice Champion is a huge fan of Coop, the original court dog.

**Justice Champion**

There was a media report that resonated with me at one stage. I think it was in one of the local newspapers that described the impact of the dog on a victim who described the dog ‘licking away the tears.

**Evan Martin**

I never met Coop, the dog from the pilot program, who is currently working at the Coroner’s Court.

Coop sadly died a few months back. But when I met with Julie Morrison, she introduced me to Lucy, the current court dog. A lovely chocolate brown labrador.

And it was the most adorable introduction I’ve ever experienced.

**Julie Morrison**

The waiting room, no matter where you’re waiting in the court world or down here at the OPP, the waiting room’s a fairly stressful place. So, Lucy now introduces herself by holding her business card in her mouth as she walks up to someone, and I say, ‘Put your hands out’, and they put their hands out, and I say, ‘Give’, and Lucy drops the business card in their hands.

It’s just a lovely way for people to start smiling, to start engaging, to start petting her. She starts wagging her tail. Because one of the difficult things about her job is that she’s got to be great and loving a lot of people every day. It’s not like she works with only one person. So, we need to keep her energy level up too. So the whole business card thing is just a nice icebreaker.

**Evan Martin**

So how does the program actually work? What’s Lucy’s job description?

**Julie Morrison**

Predominantly she works from the witness room. So, she’s in high demand from people and, sadly, a lot of the matters we deal with are sexual offence matters, and in those cases, these people are often choosing not to go to court, and of course, here in Australia, people can choose to give their evidence from a remote room like we’re sitting in at the moment.

But it’s been really important to me that we expand the program so that, you know - not everyone can get access to a remote room. There’s a finite number in the Melbourne precinct, and sometimes people have to go to court, and sometimes people want to go to court.

So, Lucy’s been training up. I’ve found some very dog-friendly judges and magistrates who let us come into their courtrooms and sit, and she just basically does what she’s doing at the moment - lying quietly. And she’s now been in a courtroom on four occasions.

She’s done two plea hearings, a sentence hearing and very excitingly, she’s done her first jury trial, which was actually on the witness stand, and that’s what I’ve been working for the last two years, for that moment to get her on the witness stand, because it was the first time it has happened in Australia.

**Evan Martin**

How’d she go?

**Julie Morrison**

She was brilliant, she was brilliant. She basically went to sleep. She does what Lucy normally does.

**Evan Martin**

Does Lucy do anything particular when she detects someone having a meltdown or stress? Is she trained to respond?

**Julie Morrison**

That’s a really interesting question. So, it was one of the things I looked closely at, and I was very fortunate to have been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study court dog programs in America and Canada, because they’ve been using dogs since 2004 there. So, a long history and a long time.

And initially, that’s what I was looking for, a dog that would intervene when someone was having a meltdown, but what I became aware of through my trip was that we actually can’t afford to have a dog intervene in an overt, physical way. The whole purpose of a dog when they’re giving evidence is to be quiet, calm and unobtrusive, so that the jury isn’t distracted and the witness isn't distracted, because anything that the dog could do could potentially lead to an objection by defence or an appeal on the grounds that the dog was there, which has happened in America.

**Evan Martin**

In criminal trials, the jury is not allowed to see the accused person in handcuffs, as they might be left with an impression, either conscious or subconscious, that the person is guilty because of the fact that someone else has decided they should be transported to and from court in handcuffs.

For a similar reason, jury members shouldn’t see a dog in court with a witness.

**Julie Morrison**

The issue with the dogs in a courtroom and on a witness, stand is that it potentially - or this is the argument that defence can mount - potentially could prejudice a juror to feel sympathy for that person because they have a dog.

**Evan Martin**

You mentioned earlier that there are a finite number of remote witness rooms. There are also a finite number of dogs. How do you decide who Lucy works with?

**Julie Morrison**

That’s one of the hardest parts of my job, is having to triage and prioritise who gets the dog. She does a lot of work with children, and we have to say that children will take priority. If a child is giving evidence, then that is going to take priority over someone, for instance, who would like to have Lucy attend a conference with their solicitor with them, because giving

evidence, if you like, is our highest priority, and children giving evidence is an even higher priority. So, if I have a conflict, it will go to a child giving evidence.

The next priority after that will be an adult giving evidence, then it will be perhaps a child who’s going through an intermediary assessment, but yeah, it’s a horrible part to the job, and sometimes, yeah, we need to sort of roundtable it to sort of say, well, whose need is greater? Because you never know. You know, how do you gauge someone’s trauma?

I had a lady one time who was a lady in her 60s who was a victim of an aggravated burglary and, you know, on the face of it you might think, oh, you know, aggravated burglary. Really? She was absolutely distraught - so much so that her doctor had advised that she not even come to the committal. She was just not coping that well. When she knew she had an opportunity to have a dog, she said, ‘Alright, I’ll come.’ She came, she did a brilliant job in a very short time. The matter has gone on to trial and she’s requested Lucy for the trial.

So, you never really can tell, and one of the things that this job has taught me is to not second-guess and to not try and sort of say, ‘Well, your grief is better.’ But having said that, yes. We do need to prioritise, and we need more dogs. [laughter]

**Julie Morrison**

There was a couple of occasions down at Child Witness Services. We had a young girl who was very disengaged. You know, didn’t want to be there, had all sorts of problems, this poor young girl, and a lot of anger too, as well.

The social worker said to me after Lucy had supported her, both in the waiting room and in the remote witness room, she said, ‘You just can’t put in words the difference that Lucy makes.’ She said she just lowers the energy, and because she is so quiet and calm, just tends to bring people down. And again, taking that anger and heightened emotion out of the situation helps people through.

I had another case of a young girl - the social worker came out and said to me, ‘No one go in the kitchen. I’ve had someone who’s had a meltdown.’

And she saw me and she said, ‘Is Lucy free?’ and I said, ‘Well, actually, she is. She’s just finished.’

So, you know, we went to the kitchen, and this girl who had been crying and screaming just saw Lucy and stopped and hugged and sobbed and hugged and laughed and started playing with her. And after about 20 minutes, you know, we said, ‘Lucy’s free now. Would you like her to come back into the room with you?’

She said, ‘No. I think I might be too distracted.’ But she said, ‘You know what? I’m okay now. I can go back in.’

So, again, she just took that raw emotion out.

**Evan Martin**

There must be a lot of training involved before a dog is ready for this job?

**Julie Morrison**

So Lucy comes to us from Assistance Dogs of Australia, who have been training mobility-assistance dogs for about the last 25 or so years. They’ve also been training up dogs to work in educational facilities and to support people with PTSD. But the training foundations for dogs doing these sorts of jobs is fairly similar.

So, I approached them when we knew we needed a dog full-time, and they said to me, ‘Look, we’ve got this dog who we think might be really good for you.’ And I said, ‘Sure’, and they said, ‘Would you like to go and see her?’ and I said ‘Sure, where is she?’ and they said ‘She’s in prison.’

**Nick Rowe**

So, my name is Nick Rowe. I'm the Prison Director of Southern Queensland Correctional Centre, which is a privately operated prison in Queensland run by Serco.

Serco has been operating the Pups in Prison program in partnerships with Assistance Dogs Australia since 2010.

It was an initiative at the time by the director at the prison. He could see the benefit, one, to the community, two, to Assistance Dogs Australia, but also for the rehabilitation of the prisoners, being able to care for the animals.

**Nick Rowe**

In the time that we've had the dogs, we've placed over 40 dogs into the community to support people with a range of disabilities. Physical disabilities, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, multiple sclerosis, Autism, PTSD, dementia.

So, correctional staff work with the prisoners. The dogs come into the prison. They are allocated a handler, which is a prisoner. The prisoners then stay with them 24 hours a day. And so, they really get a personal bond with the dog.

**Evan Martin**

While support dogs clearly have a tremendous impact on the community, Nick has also witnessed great results when it comes to one of the key functions of prisons: rehabilitation.

**Nick Rowe**

We've got some prisoners that are serving life sentences, some that are serving short sentences. But what we've seen is that, you know, they want to give back to the community. It's helped them with their mental health. It's helped people get off medication whilst they've been in prison. People have been on long term, whether it's opiate substitution programs, or clinical or chronic mental health issues. We've seen a real reduction in that. Just because of being with the dog and being on the program, really. So, it's been really, really beneficial and plus, they know that they can volunteer when they get out, as well. So, they've got something to look forward to when they're released as well - be a member of the community that's also Assistance Dogs Australia.

Prisoners are sent to prison as punishment not for punishment. So, we don't punish people when they're here. We have to rehabilitate them. You know, 99.9% of these people are going to be let out into the community. So, we do our damnedest to get them out into the community better citizens than when they came into the correctional facility. So, you know, the old adage of lock them up and throw away the key is long gone, because that doesn't work. You know, we need to make these people better citizens. And this program is definitely one of the vehicles that we use to drive that change.

**Evan Martin**

Can you tell me about the woman who trained Lucy?

**Nick Rowe**

Yeah, I can speak about her. She's a life sentence prisoner. I think it's 15, 16 years she's been serving. She'd worked in a lot of areas in the prison. She worked in prisoner reception, she worked in the industries, she worked as cleaners in the gymnasium. She'd never really cared for animals, so she was really receptive to the program.

And we saw the benefits straight away. She's a very mature prisoner. She understands that she's taken from the community and she wanted to give back to the community, and you know, that's somebody that's gone through the court system with a very, very serious crime and fully acknowledges that she needs to give back to the community, and was only so proud to hand Lucy across, which was very upsetting for her, btu she understands that the recipients need it far more than she needs it.

**Nick Rowe**

The women that are training the dogs up, when the dog is about to leave, the recipient comes into the prison, meets the prisoner, the woman that's trained the dog, gets to understand, sits down, speaks about why the dog is going to the recipient, what disabilities or PTSD they've got.

And so they can really relate to that, and then normally, yes, it's an emotional time, but they hand the dog over, knowing that it's done the best it can and it's going to serve a great purpose for the person that needs it in the community.

**Julie Morrison**

I was very fortunate to be invited back to the prison last month, to meet the prisoner who trained her, and they had a bit of a celebration ceremony, and this prisoner said that training Lucy was the best thing that’s happened in her life.

**Evan Martin**

Lucy’s handler gave a speech on the day, and while we don’t have a recording, we were given a written copy.

Here’s an excerpt.

**Actor (prisoner)**

It was pretty much immediately after I met Lucy that she became my best friend. We spent all day together talking, walking, training, playing, me laughing at her as well as learning from each other.

I knew I was training Lucy to go and help a person that was in need and she would in turn change their life, but once I found out that Lucy was going to be a courthouse assistance dog, things changed for me. I knew that Lucy would have the opportunity to help hundreds if not thousands of people; this in itself warmed my heart.

I know that I will never be able to take away the pain that I have caused... however I have had a hand in helping others that are going through the same things that my victims and their families did. This will never make me forget or make up for my actions, but I feel that this experience in training Lucy has made me realise that I am not a bad person.

**Julie Morrison**

It was really moving and, to us, it was a wonderful story of restorative justice that she can contribute back. And what’s been really lovely is everyone I’ve told that story to has reacted really positively. You know, no one’s sort of said, ‘Ew, she came from a prison?’

So, it’s been really positively received and we’re very proud of the fact of what she’s done and our association with the South Queensland Correctional Facility.

**Julie Morrison**

Perhaps one of my favourite stories is a little boy who she worked with. He was only - he was only eight or nine - he was a wee thing. And quite often when children have to give evidence at their special hearing, the judge and the defence and the prosecution will come down to meet the child before the special hearing starts. And this particular judge came down this time, and the little boy went to meet the judge, and so I gave him Lucy’s lead. I always like to give the lead to children because it just gives them some sort of control.

So, he’s walking down the hall to meet the judge. You know, Lucy’s nearly as tall as him. And the judge said - the little boy introduced Lucy to the judge. And she said, ‘What do you like best about Lucy?’

And he said, ‘She listens to me’,

**Evan Martin**

Gertie’s Law is produced by the Supreme Court of Victoria.

If you’re interested in learning more about Lucy, you can head over to Instagram and give her a follow! You can find her at ‘CourtDogLucy’

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