

Gertrude tunes in to doggy-talk

The Watling family in Estcourt have two very precious dogs.

Socks, with her pretty spaniel-like face, long black hair and brown socks, is 15 and almost totally deaf and blind. Yet she can still enjoy life and be part of the family because of her friend Humphrey.

Eight-year-old Humphrey, a Maltese, has appointed himself as her eyes and ears, her guide and protector. In fact, if it hadn't been for Humphrey's loving guidance, Socks would not be with the Watlings today.

Gertrude Ndaba, who has kept house for the Watling family for the past 26 years, has built up a special rapport with little Humphrey.

"For instance," she says, "when I want the dogs to come for their breakfast, Socks can't hear me calling, so I tell Humphrey: 'Find Socks!' And he runs around the garden until he finds her. Then he nudges her and pulls and tugs her along by the ear to bring her to me."

And if a delivery man leaves a parcel on the table outside the kitchen, Humphrey scampers off to tell Gertrude. First Humphrey will bark at her side and if she doesn't get the message promptly, he'll take her hand in his mouth and lead her to the parcel.

It was while the Watling family was away on holiday in

Zimbabwe that the communication skills between Gertrude and Humphrey were put to the ultimate test.

"It was after midnight," recalls Gertrude. "I was asleep in my flat next to the house when Humphrey woke me up. He was barking outside the door. 'Go away, Humphrey,' I told him because sometimes Humphrey calls me for no good reason."

Only the day before, Gertrude explains, while she had been sitting on the lawn knitting in the sunshine, Humphrey had taken her hand in his mouth and insisted she walk to the gate with him. True enough, there on the road a child was crying. But the mother was with the child and there was no cause for concern.

"So I told him again, 'Go away, Humphrey,'" says Gertrude. "Then he started barking and scratching at my door. I was a bit scared, but I got up and went outside."

The dogs usually slept in a sheltered section of the courtyard outside Gertrude's door. She couldn't see Socks there and thought she must have left her locked up in the house. Gertrude searched the house and couldn't find Socks there either.

"But I didn't worry too much," Gertrude says. "I thought she must be in the garden somewhere. So again I told Humphrey to be quiet. Then I closed my door. I switched off the light and got into bed."

This time Humphrey began to bark frantically and even started to throw himself against the door. Gertrude knew then that Humphrey was desperately trying to tell her something.

Once more she got up and this time allowed Humphrey to lead her. Humphrey rushed through the courtyard gate that led onto the lawn. He ran across the lawn, looking back every so often to make sure Gertrude was following him. Then he scampered straight to the edge of the swimming pool, looked down into the water and then back at Gertrude again.

Running by this time, Gertrude stopped and peered into the cold dark water. There, almost totally submerged except for her head, was Socks.

"Socks was almost not moving. She was sinking. I could see she was very tired. I knelt down and pulled her out," relates Gertrude.

Clutching the soaking wet dog to her, Gertrude ran to the laundry. She wrapped Socks in a towel and rubbed and rubbed her till her circulation returned and she was able to stand.

All the while, Humphrey sat by watching anxiously. Now and then he would sniff his old friend to make sure she was alright. Both dogs spent the rest of the night warm and safe next to Gertrude's bed.

Says Gertrude: "Humphrey is a very, very clever dog. He can't talk but he will tell you what he wants if you listen to him. When I tell my grandchildren about Humphrey, they say he's clever 'kakhulu, kakhulu.' I tell them if you know how to listen to a dog, he'll tell you many things."

Humphrey was awarded the NSPCA's Certificate of Merit for Outstanding Service by an Animal.





Sky and Rain leave a legacy

It was past midnight. All was quiet in Durban North, where Wilma Claassen and her two children, Michelle (18) and Theo (16), slept peacefully in their double-storey house with its beautiful view of Blue Lagoon.

Outside, in a large kennel under the thatched gazebo next to the swimming pool, slept Sky and Rain, the family's much-loved Staffordshire bull terriers. Sky was the mother, and Rain her son.

An off-shore breeze began to rustle the leaves on the trees. Then, for reasons no-one will ever know, the light in the roof of the gazebo shorted.

Michelle Claassen blinked herself awake. Uncomprehending and sleepy-eyed, she gazed for a second at the unfamiliar brightness that flickered outside her bedroom window and danced on the walls of her room. She smelled smoke.

The next instant, with the crackle of fire in her ears, she was at the window. Down below, the thatched gazebo roof was an inferno, shooting up flames almost as high as her head.

Michelle ran through to her mother's bedroom. Shocked and dazed, Wilma pushed the alarm button.

The clanging of the alarm was the first Theo knew of the fire. He jumped up and ran downstairs dressed only in his pyjama baggies.

"All I could hear were the terrible yelps and howls of our dogs," said Theo. "I saw immediately that a big piece of burning thatch had fallen in front of the kennel and trapped them inside.

"I ran to get the hosepipe and tried to hose down the thatch and the kennel. I tried to shield myself from the flames by standing behind one of the brick pillars of the gazebo but the heat was so intense I couldn't get close enough."

Then Michelle poured a bucket of water over Theo, little knowing that her action would ultimately save his life.

"Get away! Get away!" Theo shouted at his mother and sister as they hovered in a desperate helplessness around him. "Go and telephone for help!"

No-one could see the gas cylinder which stood on the built-in bar-counter of the gazebo. The intense heat was transforming it into a potentially lethal bomb.

Wilma takes up the story. "I ran inside and Michelle ran up the driveway to meet neighbours who were responding to our alarm bell. I was on the phone when I heard a massive explosion. I just froze. The next second Theo came running in, screaming 'I'm burnt! I'm burnt!'

"He was pink all over and his hair was smoking and singed black. I wrapped a sheet around him and took him to hospital while Michelle telephoned the fire brigade."

Later the family found that the explosion had blown off the entire gazebo roof.



Although Theo does not remember this, he must have been flung several metres through the air. The charred bodies of Sky and Rain were found too.

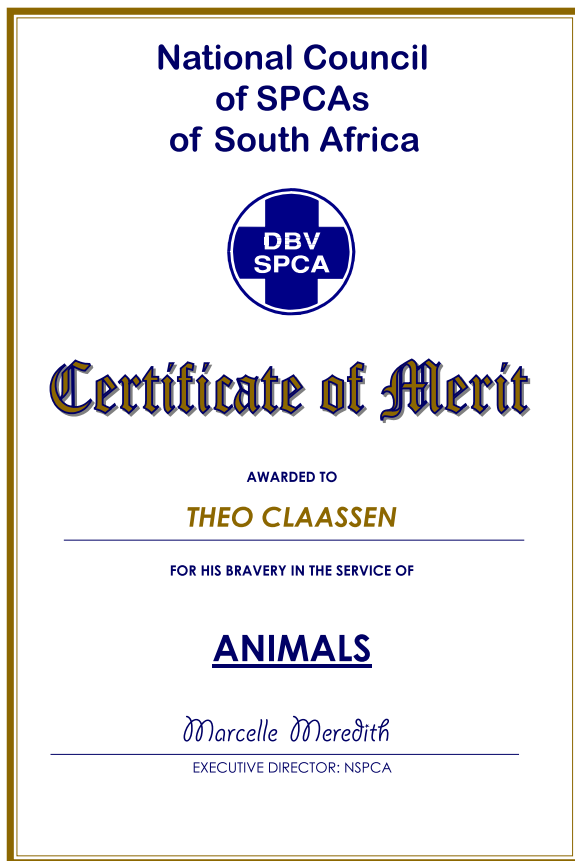
Theo suffered second and third degree burns over ninety percent of his body. The bucket of water Michelle had thrown over him had soaked his baggy shorts and his shoulder-length hair, thus preventing his scalp and lower abdomen from being burned. Michelle's action saved her brother's life.

For five days, Theo fought for his life in the Intensive Care Unit of Westville Hospital. He spent a further three weeks in the general ward, and eight weeks convalescing at home. He still has to undergo several skin grafts.

"I had to try to save Sky and Rain," says the brave Chanden House college schoolboy who is also an accomplished drummer with his own band. "They were part of our family. They were often with me when I went boogy-boarding on the beach. I miss them a lot."

Theo adds that his experience has in a certain way changed and enriched his perception of life. "Young people tend to think of themselves as immortal, and that bad things won't happen to them. I realize I'm very mortal and life has become more precious. I appreciate each moment more and I think that makes me a more friendly person. That's the legacy our Staffies left me."

Theo Claassen was presented with the NSPCA's Gold Medal for Bravery in the Service of Animals (1994).



Bacchus hangs in the balance

As a professional house painter, Joseph Nxumalo thought he had a good head for heights.

He climbs up and down scaffolding all day to reach the uppermost parts of high walls.

But, he says, standing on a plank at the top of a double-storey house is a far cry from dangling on a rope over the edge of a cliff with a 200-metre sheer drop below.

The saga began when Joseph brought in his workmen to do some paintwork at the Cockerell home, which borders on the Palmiet Nature Reserve in Westville, Durban.

To avoid the dusty business of sandpapering and scraping, the Cockerell family decided to move to their beach cottage at Umdloti for the weekend. They left behind their big 11-year-old Great Dane/Bull Mastiff-cross called Bacchus, and Spunky, their Golden Labrador.

Bacchus often went for a walk by himself along the wilderness trail in the Palmiet Nature Reserve. With his nose he would manoeuvre the bolt of the garden gate out of its slot and amble off to one of the steep gravelly paths that led down to the river. There he would wade in the cool water, lapping thirstily as he did so.

Bacchus was getting old. He wasn't as steady on his feet as he used to be. So Mrs Merrill Cockerell had a padlock put on the gate to keep Bacchus in.

However, while the Cockerell family was away, one of Joseph's workmen forgot to padlock the gate.

Bacchus saw his chance. Using his nose to manoeuvre the bolt, he was soon out of the gate and trotting happily along the edge of the cliff. And when the Cockerell family returned home on Sunday afternoon, only a very worried Spunky was there to greet them.

"I could see Spunky was fretting madly," says 17-year-old Leshane Cockerell. "Something was upsetting her and nobody seemed to have seen Bacchus for quite a while."

Leshane and her mother split up and started searching the garden for Bacchus, whistling and calling his name.

"Then I heard his bark coming from the nature reserve. Just one bark," says Leshane. "I called my mother and together we raced over to the reserve in the direction of the bark."

But there was no dog in sight.

Merrill said she couldn't bring herself to go to the edge of the cliff and look over. But Leshane climbed a boulder on the lip of the cliff and in a sitting position, gingerly edged her way to the point where she could peer over.

What she saw made her stomach lurch. There, 20 metres down, was Bacchus, straddled precariously across a thin tree growing sideways out of the cliff face. And below was nothing but a 200-metre drop to the river bed.

"He must have slipped on the gravel of one of the paths going down, and fallen right over the edge," says Leshane.



"He couldn't see me but I think he knew I was there. He didn't move. He didn't wag his tail. He didn't make a sound. I was terrified that he might suddenly try to look up at me and lose his balance."

Joseph takes up the story. "Leshane was crying when she came and begged me to rescue Bacchus. I ran to see where Bacchus was. He was in a very dangerous place. I knew if he moved he would fall and die."

Joseph ran back to the house to fetch a long rope. He tied one end to a tree near the cliff-edge and the other round his waist, leaving a long piece available to tie around Bacchus.

Merrill and Leshane, the gardener and one of Joseph's workmen watched with bated breath as Joseph slowly lowered himself first over the cliff-edge and then slowly, slowly down to Bacchus. It took him about fifteen minutes to reach the dog.

"I had to stand on that thin little tree that was holding Bacchus up," recalls Joseph. "All the time I was scared Bacchus would move to greet me and fall to the bottom. But he didn't move. Bacchus is a big dog. I knew he was too heavy for me to carry him up. He could have slipped out of my arms. So I tied the long piece of rope hanging from my waist round Bacchus's stomach. Then I tried to hold him up under his stomach and shouted to them at the top to pull us up."

About 30 minutes later, an exhausted, sweating and

trembling Joseph stood once again on solid earth. Bacchus collapsed on the ground, too weak to stand. Just how long he had hung, suspended in mid-air, no-one could say precisely. After a moment's rest, Joseph carried him back to the house.

"But," says Leshane, "That loveable, crazy dog who liked to sleep on my mom's pot plants was back to normal once he'd had water and food."

As for Joseph, once he'd rested in the shade with a long glass of cold fruit juice, he pronounced that to see the joy on Leshane's face was enough for him.

"Joseph's courage that day was something special," says Leshane. "I couldn't have done what he did. If he hadn't been so brave, I'd have had to call the fire brigade, but they might have got there too late. At any moment Bacchus might have fallen. We are all indebted to Joseph."

Joseph Nxumalo received the NSPCA's Certificate of Merit for Bravery in the Service of Animals.

**National Council
of SPCAs
of South Africa**



Certificate of Merit

AWARDED TO

JOSEPH NXUMALO

FOR HIS BRAVERY IN THE SERVICE OF

RESCUING ANIMALS

Marcelle Meredith

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: NSPCA