

VISUALLY IMPAIRED LENA SAYS HER LIFE HAS IMPROVED THANKS TO SOCIAL EYES

Guide dog Pearce is a sight for sore eyes



by **Georgina Butler**

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NAVIGATING life as a young person can be challenging and getting the most out of Milton Keynes is crucial to being part of the social scene.

But living with a disability can make accessing all that a city – and the population within it – has to offer even more difficult.

Lena Welch, from Far Bletchley, is 22 years old and severely sight impaired. She also has cerebral palsy.

As a visually impaired young person living and working in Milton Keynes, she provides a glimpse into the realities of someone living life to the full, despite visual impairment.

Lena was born with a visual impairment, but did not register as severely sight impaired until her eyesight deteriorated when she was 17.

Describing her poor eyesight, Lena said: "Basically, everything I see is flat.

"I have Nystagmus which is constant movement of the eyes which makes reading and writing more difficult as the words swim on the page and I have a block squint which is where my eyes turn inwards constantly and makes things blurry."

Most of the things Lena sees now are blurred and distorted and in the dark she can see very little.

The cerebral palsy affects her balance and coordination and, although not in a wheelchair, Lena has weak joints and falls easily as her ankles give way.

Lena is accompanied everywhere by

her guide dog Pearce.

"We have been together 18 months," she explained.

"I can now go out and do what I want, when I want because I have Pearce by my side in everything I do and my confidence and self esteem has rocketed.

"I felt really vulnerable using a long cane and was embarrassed because as a teenager walking around with a cane or any sort of mobility aid isn't cool, but I adjusted more to a dog."

However, daily tasks remain testing, with even getting cereal for breakfast posing a challenge.

"I have to make sure I have my finger on the inside of the bowl to make sure I don't pour too much milk and also for drinking a glass of water I have a little device which beeps when the water touches it and tells me it is full."

Lena works as a switchboard operator and receptionist for Mouchel and takes the bus to work.

"I cannot see the bus numbers or when the bus is coming so I have to ask the driver to make sure I am getting on the right bus.

"Sometimes drivers will be nice and tell me where there are spare seats and when I am at my stop, but the majority don't.

"Pearce knows when we have to get off as we go over a certain bump and starts to move so I can usually tell when it is time."

At work, Lena has special magnified software so she can be as efficient as everyone else.

However, changes to the software and travelling home in the evenings during

the winter highlight problems of being visually impaired.

"If there is something I need for work it is a whole long process, but we work well as a team."

"The winter is appalling as I cannot see where I have to get off on the way home because it is dark so I have to rely on the bus driver or other customers."

Lena is a fundraiser for Guide Dogs, the guide dog services charity.

She is also a member of Social Eyes, a charity for visually impaired children and young people in Milton Keynes and Buckinghamshire.

The charity organises social evenings at restaurants, and outings including bowling, swimming, horse riding and theatre trips.

The chance to socialise with other visually impaired youngsters is a valuable opportunity for Lena:

"You are more able to associate with them and talk about disabilities more openly as you know they will understand what you are going through."

> Social Eyes is hosting a James Bond charity ball on Saturday, September 25 at 7pm at the Hilton Hotel in Kents Hill.

The event includes welcome drinks on arrival, a three-course meal, live band, casino tables and auction. Tickets are £32 and all proceeds go to helping visually impaired youngsters.

> Visit www.social-eyes.org.uk or contact Steve on 07952 734723 for more information. October 2 - 10 is National Guide Dog Week. Visit www.guidedogs.org.uk for more information and to donate.

WOMAN'S BEST FRIEND: Lena Welch with her trusted companion Pearce



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