

# Maria developed new focus after assault forced her to ditch the career she loved

**W**hen an assault at work forced former social worker Maria Michael to medically retire at the age of just 33, she feared she might never work again, let alone have a career as rewarding as the one she had worked hard to build since leaving school.

The incident in 2008, in which Maria was yanked by the hair during a handover at a residential unit for young people with disabilities, was to spark a litany of debilitating health problems – including fibromyalgia and postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome – eventually forcing her to give up her career working with disabled children and their families.

Having lost the job she loved, and now waking up to crippling chronic pain each day, the mother of two said that she soon found herself struggling to find the will to get out of bed most days.

“I wasn’t particularly academic growing up, so I had to work hard to get where I was,” she said. “I had a successful career, a pension, a salary and a company car, and then everything stopped overnight. In some ways, I felt like I’d lost my identity.”

Determined not to let her ill health rule her life, Maria said that the turning point was the decision to get a puppy, never suspecting for one moment that the arrival of French mastiff-boxer cross Harvey would set her on the path to a fulfilling new career as an award-winning photographer.

Ten years on and Maria, 43, now specialises in pet photography, striving to capture the personalities of her subjects and to honour the bond between animal and owner that she herself credits for helping her to get her own life back on track.

“At the point just before we got Harvey, I was probably

Former social worker Maria Michael tells **Eleanor Kent** how the arrival of puppy Harvey was the catalyst for getting her life back on track



at my lowest,” she said. “My mobility had really changed and I was constantly in a lot of pain. Just getting up from sitting in a chair would have me in tears as

everything would seize.

I was also suffering with cognitive dysfunction, so

I’d get lost on my own street or confuse the children’s names.

“With the children at

school and

absolutely no motivation most days, Harvey really was the guilt trip I needed to force myself out of bed every morning. Even now, some mornings it can be a struggle, but then I look at his sappy face and know he needs a walk, so that’s what gets me up. He forces me to push through the pain.”

Having always loved taking photos from a young age, Maria – who is mum to Theo, 16, and Demi, 14, both pupils at Leventhorpe School in Sawbridgeworth – said that it was her sister-in-law who suggested, after seeing a card she had made for a friend’s birthday using a picture of Harvey, that she had a talent for photography.

“My sister-in-law said I should make some more and try selling them, but my first thought was that no-one would want to buy them,” Maria explained. “At around the same time, the children’s primary school had a shopping night, so I organised a little stall and one lady happened to ask if I took pictures of other people’s dogs and I just said yes.”

Maria has a studio at her home in Little Hallingbury, where she lives with her children and husband Michael, a lawyer who in his spare time manages the Bishop’s Stortford Wanderers Under-16s football team.

She is now a sought-after, multi-award-winning pet photographer and a regular at dog shows and other events across the region. She is often invited to speak about her work and was a guest speaker at The



Photography Show at the NEC Birmingham in March.

Earlier this year, one of her images of five French bulldogs won international acclaim when it was awarded third place in the Pet Photographer of the Year category at The Societies of Photographers’ annual convention. The competition attracts thousands of entries from photographers across the globe.

“To know that I have been ranked third in an international competition entered by some of the world’s most amazing photographers makes me immensely proud,” said Maria.

More importantly, through her work, she is on a mission to change the profile of pet photography, which she said was often viewed as “gimmicky”.

Having researched animal behaviour, Maria said: “For me, it’s so much more than just taking a cutesy picture. Since the days of cavemen, humans have needed a partner, so we created a whole new species. My photography is about honouring the unique relationship we have with our dogs.

“The other thing about pet photography is that people think it’s easy. It’s actually really challenging, and what I pride myself on is having the ability to connect with the animals and understand their behaviour. If you can’t understand or respect the powerful bond people have with their animals then you really shouldn’t be doing it, and I think because of my own experience

it gives me that deeper insight and understanding.”

Maria’s next project is to put together a portfolio of images that specifically conveys the often remarkably strong relationship that people have with their dogs, drawing on stories from around the world. These include accounts of dogs like Barney, a devoted beagle who helped his family overcome their grief after losing their young son to cancer, and Hachiko the Japanese Akita, who would sit outside the railway station gates waiting for his owner to come home from work each day even after he had died.

“As humans, we often don’t see just how much our dogs do for us because we aren’t in tune with them,” Maria said. “So this new project is all about sharing stories that evidence how strong that bond can be.”

As for her own relationship with Harvey, she continued: “In lots of ways he’s an unofficial assistance dog and, in all honesty, the reason why I managed to stay out of a wheelchair. He gives me a sense of security and the motivation to get on and do things.

“When I was a social worker I genuinely believed I was destined to do that for my whole career, but I do now believe that fate pointed me in a different direction. The photography is what I should be doing, and because of what I’ve been through, I think it does give me an affinity with the people and animals I work with.

“My days can be ridiculously



Maria Michael with French mastiff-boxer cross Harvey

hard, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone, but in every negative situation there is always a positive if you're prepared to go and look for it. "I'm so grateful to my husband, children, family and close friends who have been there for me

throughout this journey, always believing in me. And to Harvey, of course, who is my best friend." ■ You can find more information on her website [www.detheo.co.uk](http://www.detheo.co.uk) or find her on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/DetheoPhotography](http://www.facebook.com/DetheoPhotography).

