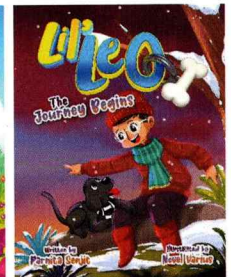
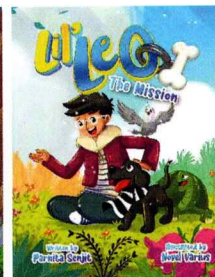
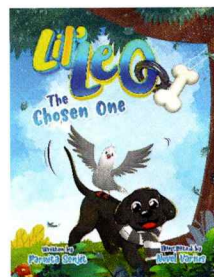
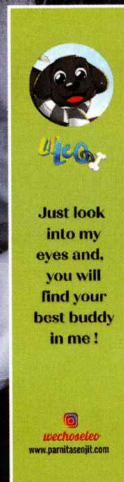


# Lil' Leo

Lab charms as a therapy dog and inspires a children's book series.

Parnita Senjit and Leo.

**A**n elderly woman in the dementia ward of a British care facility was staring out her window when a black Lab named Leo walked into her room. His handler, Parnita Senjit, asked the woman if she'd like to visit with her dog, and without turning from her view, the woman gestured and asked for Leo to sit by her side.





As the patient stroked Leo's soft fur, gazing out at a sunny spring day with blooming flowers and puffy clouds, she said, "I wandered lonely as a cloud" and went on to recite all four stanzas of the beloved William Wordsworth poem.

"She wasn't saying the poem until Leo sat next to her – she was just watching – but once Leo sat, she started saying that poem and every word of it," Senjit recalled. "It was so beautiful."

That's the kind of "magic" Leo brings as a therapy dog in a variety of settings he visits each week, from assisted living facilities to libraries, high schools, and the adolescent wing at a psychiatric hospital. The nearly 12-year-old dog stays calm and composed even when children sob while petting him and privately confessing their troubles.

For instance, one high school student wanted privacy and asked to be alone with Leo and his handler. As she petted the relaxed dog, she began crying uncontrollably and eventually confided that her parents were separating. Her home life was so stressful that it was negatively affecting her studies and her general happiness and well-being.

Senjit asked if she would like to visit with Leo each week during visits to the school, noting that Leo would love it now that they were friends. So each week as the girl sat with Leo, Senjit would listen and share that Leo would also be scared if he was left alone, and how important it is to be kind to yourself.

Thanks in part to those weekly visits, the girl's outlook dramatically improved.

"It was more of helping her to come up with her own ideas of how she can deal with certain situations," Senjit recalled. "The whole idea of the sessions was that it's important that you appreciate who you are, your journey, how you are feeling...even adults have those kinds of feelings."

For the past 5½ years, Leo has comforted numerous people of all ages. He loves his job – both the attention he gets and the carrots and green beans he receives as a reward for visiting so many people.

He's not just a star at the facilities he visits but in a children's book series called *Lil' Leo*. Senjit began writing the books in response to news articles about "lockdown puppies" purchased at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic being abandoned by owners who decided they didn't want to train or care for them – sometimes leaving them tied to a lamppost in a park or in a crate on a footpath or roadside.

"It was very heartbreaking for me," Senjit recalled. "So I started discussing with my husband, 'What's going on?"



PHOTO COURTESY OF PARINITA SENJIT

**Sometimes, just being present is all the therapy that is needed.**

**Leo at school.**

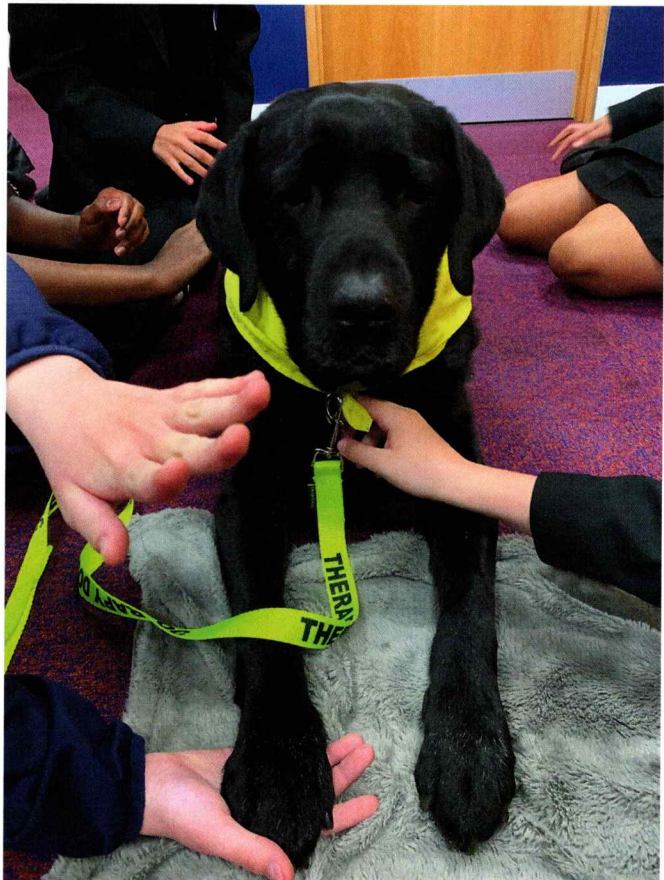


PHOTO COURTESY OF PARINITA SENJIT



How do I deal with this? Because this is making me very restless.”

In the *Lil’ Leo* books, an illustrated version of Leo as a puppy helps readers learn about themes like friendship, coping with change, and animal rescue – with the overarching concepts of never abandoning a pet, and being kind to yourself and others.

“I can give him a voice where he expresses his feelings,” she said, “helping families and children understand how our pets feel.”

Leo has made such an outsized impact to readers and on his community in the county of Surrey in England that he won a BBC Make A Difference Award in October of 2024. Senjit rewarded him with so many carrots, green beans, yogurt, and boiled chicken that he gained weight.

The award is a well-deserved honor, according to Eugenio Barone, who until recently oversaw Leo and Senjit’s volunteer work when he was Communities

Manager for MHA Communities South London, which provides social groups and care homes for seniors.

“Leo is necessary to our community. Physical contact with him seemed to relax the patients,” he said. “Pari and Leo are a fantastic team, not only because they seem to move in unity of thought but more importantly because they are able to defuse tensions between individuals and groups when they are present.”

Barone added that they are willing to work with anyone who is ready to engage, regardless of their cultural background, and that their kindness is “contagious.”

“Working with Leo and Pari is an incredible experience,” he said.

Still, Leo isn’t about to rest on his laurels. In addition to his ongoing work as a therapy dog, he’s an integral part of a new intergenerational art project called Soulful Connection. Senjit, an artist who also works part-time for a care home, said the goal is to build a bridge to mental



PHOTO COURTESY OF PARINITA SENJIT

Leo enjoys a therapy session.



“  
**For me, Leo is a huge inspiration,  
and he has transformed my  
mindset in a very big way.”**

wellness through nature therapy, pet therapy, talk therapy, and art therapy.

Participants, ranging from young kids to seniors with dementia, accompany Senjit and Leo on a nature walk to begin a Soulful Connection session. After breathing exercises to deepen relaxation, groups of four paint on a canvas together.

“Leo’s role is to bring that calm atmosphere during the session,” she said. “And it does help because younger children have participated – six- and seven-year-olds. So they really feel nice when Leo is there. They go near him, and then they come back and they paint. He is definitely a big part of that project.”

She’s hoping to expand the project and continue to bring awareness of how pets can contribute to our well-being, and how important it is that we return the favor by taking care of them – something she learned from her special dog.

Leo is her first Lab – she and her husband later welcomed a second black Lab, Bruno, into their home – and she considers him “life-changing.” By witnessing his positive impact on others and herself with his “calm, composed energy and his stable mind,” she’s come to believe in the importance of decluttering our minds to emulate that type of energy. She’s also training Bruno to follow in Leo’s footsteps.

“For me, Leo is a huge inspiration, and he has transformed my mindset in a very big way,” she said. “He’s my world.” 🐾

For more information, visit: [lilleo.co.uk](http://lilleo.co.uk).



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America and a member of the DWAA Hall of Fame. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).

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