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What started out as tricks outside a pub has turned into a lifelong career for dog trainer Steve Austin, whose work rescuing shelter dogs and giving them a new life is explored in his upcoming novel, *Working Dog Heroes*.

"I used to head up to the pub on Thursday which was pay day, you used to be able to make a lot of money by doing tricks out the front of the pub door," he said.



Steve Austin's career in training dogs is chronicled in his upcoming memoirs, 'Working Dog Heroes'. *Photo: Jennifer Polixenni Brankin*

"Sooty would roll over and stand up and all that sort of business. That got me into the world of dog training if you look at it that way.

"He was a great little dog."



Steve Austin has been training dogs since his late twenties. *Photo: Robert Shakespeare*

Known as one of Australia's top dog trainers in detection and conservation, Steve's work with dogs has been outlined in the book.

His love for animals began at an early age. As the youngest of five, Steve sought companionship among a myriad of animals he grew up with, especially Sooty, his labrador cross Kelpie who Steve said "walked into my music class at school" when he was of 12.

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"I used to race pigeons, they were magnificent. I used to have a tortoise, rabbits, my dog Sooty," he said.

"They taught me a lot of things growing up, like companionship and behaviour. If you looked after the animal correctly and did the right thing by it, they would always give you a lot more back in return. I found that out very quickly.



Steve Austin poses with his dog Missy. *Photo: Jennifer Polixenni Brankin*

"I didn't really know what I was going to do but I always gravitated towards dogs and other animals."

The passionate trainer was "quite confused growing up" in terms of career choice and kept himself busy surfing and studying horticulture before entering obedience competitions in his late twenties.

"I got involved in obedience competitions with my dogs, that really got me into the world of professional training then one thing lead to another then it just went on and on from there," he said.

He spent the next 10 years working as the national trainer for Australia's quarantine inspection service, training airport dogs in detection.

"For the government to come to a private person, it was a huge step in those days, I took that on with relish and it proved to be a great career move for me," he said.

The down-to-earth Aussie bloke said he only trained dogs from the pound or shelters to give them a new life and purpose, something that has carried on throughout his career.

"The dogs we wanted were the ones that were really really naughty.

"Really bad dogs in the naughty way, not bad dogs as in biting people, but naughty dogs who pull clothes off the line and all that," he said.

"We didn't want well behaved dogs because in detection dog work, you want a very free spirit, you want an outgoing dog and the ones that were in the pound were like the Dirty Dozen.

"Once they got work and something to put all of their energy into, they were unbelievable and they still are."



While known for his work in detection, Steve has recently begun applying his dog-whispering skills to a charity program called Young Diggers.

"Part of the program is to get young dogs for people who need companionship and to get their mind off post traumatic stress disorder" he said.

"There was a Young Diggers lady called Michelle and we got her a little maltese.

"She said to me, 'I used to get up in the morning, I would sit in front of the television and a dark veil would come over me and I would stay there until 9pm, I could never leave the house'.

"Now, not only does she leave the house, she has a pilot's licence, her whole life has changed because of a little white dog.

"It shows exactly what dogs can do to help us get through things."

"Tens of thousands" of dogs have gone through the Steve Austin training program over the years, from agency dogs to individual pet dogs, and every single one has had an impact on his life.

"I do miss them, that is without question, but here is the thing. To see them respond to one handler, to thrive with that one handler they have permanently is such a good thing," he said.

"There is a tinge of sadness but it is outweighed by the joy that you have knowing the dog is loving what it is doing.

"You never forget them. Some remain quite special, that is for sure. If the dogs didn't have an impact on your life, I would be in the wrong job.

"The best thing I like is the humour, they are very funny, dogs. Every single day they make me laugh."

***Working Dog Heroes will be released March 1, 2016.***