

Hearing Dogs For Deaf People

After sending in a picture of Harper, the Cockerpoo Hearing Dog in training for the 'Creations' project, I was asked to say a bit more about what we are currently doing with her. A Hearing Dog supports and assists a deaf person in many ways. By wearing a uniform, they make an invisible disability, visible. They accompany the person at all times and give them confidence to get out and about and encourage interaction and communication. They can alert the person to a range of domestic and alarm sounds both inside and outside the home. They provide companionship and an antidote to the isolation that deaf people can experience, something some of us can now identify with. HDDP (Hearing Dogs for Deaf People) have experienced a recent upsurge in the applications for Hearing Dogs.

Peter and I have been volunteers in training and socialising for over 10 years and our current dog, Harper, is number 11. All training is based on rewards, building confidence and making good choices, a dog is never asked to do anything it does not want to do. The process takes about 18 months and starts when the puppy arrives to live with us at 8 weeks old. We train the puppies to be good companions and progress through socialisation in many situations such as in shops, restaurants and on public transport, as Hearing Dogs must be friendly and impeccably behaved at all times. Later, we train them to recognise a range of sounds and to alert the deaf person in different ways.

Our previous trainee, called Teddy, was placed last year with a recipient, and with her permission, I reproduce her experience of having a Hearing Dog...

"Since Teddy came into my life, he has changed my life and he has changed me. I no longer have to wait at the front door all day when I'm expecting a delivery because Teddy tells me when the doorbell rings. I no longer fear a repeat of the incident when I did not hear the fire alarm because Teddy tells me when a fire alarm goes off wherever I am. I no longer worry about not waking up in the morning because Teddy will wake me. I no longer worry about burning the food or forgetting things because Teddy tells me when the kitchen timer goes off. I no longer have to worry about not hearing the smoke alarm at home because Teddy will alert me whether I'm asleep or awake. I no longer feel anxious when I'm out because Teddy is by my side and helps me... this bundle of fluff goes everywhere with me: to university, on trains, buses, the tube, taxis, shopping, restaurants, he sleeps by my bed and follows me everywhere in the house. He is so loyal, loving and intelligent. He knows if I'm not feeling my best and makes me smile and laugh everyday, I couldn't ask for better ears and will never be able to repay him in the same way he helps me. Thank you Teddy I love you."

A succession of puppies and young dogs requires patience, planning, energy and imagination! (Just like being a teacher!) Harper may have to fly regularly, so at present, Peter and I are trying to make a mock up situation so Harper can begin to get used to the experience of being on a plane. We will gradually build up experiences from climbing the steps, settling in the confined foot space, seeing and hearing the trolley and so on.

The puppies come from the Hearing Dog breeding scheme and are all breeds deemed to be most suitable for training, i.e. Labradors, poodles, spaniels and the cockerpoo cross as Harper is. All our work is closely monitored and supported by the charity which is based in Beilby near Pocklington and further information is available at <https://www.hearingdogs.org.uk/> There are many opportunities to volunteer in other ways such as gardening, driving, maintenance, walking the dogs on site, etc and support or interest is always welcome.

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