

DOG EARS: THE LIONS HEARING DOGS OF AUSTRALIA

BY FIONA DAVIES

In a world without sound, a companion who can speak without words is an immense comfort and a precious gift.

It's a gift that the Lions Hearing Dogs program has given to over 480 deaf and hard of hearing Australians in the last 30 years. The program is run by the Lions Club of Australia and involves training formerly abandoned dogs, plucked from pounds and animal shelters around the country, to assist hearing impaired people with their day-to-day lives.

Every Lions Hearing Dog is trained to alert its owner to a range of sounds, from crying babies to alarm clocks, door knocks, telephones and oven timers. Hearing dogs are trained to become their owners ears, and their rapid response to important sounds has been known to save lives. When the shrill warning of a smoke alarm sounds in the middle of the night, a hearing dog's immediate instinct is to race to awaken its owner, potentially averting disaster. But just as important is a hearing dog's role as friend and companion. The comfort, care and therapy hearing dogs give their owners is something that no assistive device or technology can provide.

Elizabeth Smith of Brisbane is the recipient of a Lions Hearing Dog. She has been living with the assistance of Dora, a King Charles Cavalier/Kelpie cross, for the past 12 months. Elizabeth has Ménière's disease, a disorder of the inner ear that affects hearing and balance. Forced to give up a cherished job as a nurse, for the last two years Elizabeth has been extremely hard of hearing. Elizabeth still struggles with the profound impact the disorder has had on her life, but says her decision to apply for a Hearing Dog was a turning point in the battle to cope.

Whenever Dora hears one of the nine sounds she is trained to respond to, she lets Elizabeth know by gently tapping her on the leg with her front paws. Once Elizabeth is alerted, Dora guides her to the source of the sound.

"I live alone and Dora has given me the freedom to remain independent in my own home", says Elizabeth. "The unconditional love and companionship she gives me is wonderful. When I fall, which is quite frequently, Dora stays by my side until I get up. She'll usually give me a lick to say, 'It's OK, I'm here'."

Other hearing dogs have been trained to respond to potentially life threatening situations - for example, by knocking the phone off the hook to trigger an emergency call when their owner falls into a seizure.



PHOTOS BY JEREMY WATSON



Like most Lions Hearing Dogs, Dora accompanies her owner everywhere she goes. All assistance dogs must maintain an unbending bond with their owners if they are to remain effective helpers. This means avoiding long periods of separation between dog and owner is vital. Legally, Dora has all the same rights as a Seeing Eye Dog, and she wears a bright orange Lions Hearing Dogs jacket to identify her. Still, due in part to their relative scarcity, awareness of Lions Hearing Dogs remains limited.

Chris Blackham-Davison of Darwin has been profoundly deaf since birth and has owned two hearing dogs in the last 20 years. For years he had to deal with his dog being refused entry into public transport, shops and restaurants. Visits to the Anti Discrimination Commission were a regular occurrence. Today he believes the public have a far better understanding of assistance dogs in general, although many people are still surprised to learn of the existence of hearing dogs.

Public awareness is essential to the Hearing Dogs program. The dogs are trained at the Hearing Dogs Centre in the Adelaide Hills through the generous gifts of donors and sponsors. It's because of these donations that the program's applicants are able to receive a hearing dog free of charge. What makes the program even more remarkable is that fact that almost all hearing dogs come from RSPCA pounds and animal welfare shelters, so the program effectively works as a rescue operation for unwanted and abandoned pets. Not only are the recipients of the program given a new lease on life, but the dogs themselves are too.

Several times a year, trainers from the Hearing Dogs association visit shelters around Australia, looking for suitable dogs to enrol in the training program. A hearing dog can be any breed or mixture of breeds, and any size, shape or colour. What the trainers look for are happy, friendly and even-tempered dogs who are less than three years of age, and of course, have impeccable hearing.

Selected dogs are brought to the training centre where they undergo an initial assessment. Assistance dogs require a very specific set of behavioural

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traits and not every dog makes the cut. Dogs who don't quite fit the bill are quickly found homes as pets. Every hearing dog spends six to eight months undergoing extensive training and socialisation at the centre. Not only must a hearing dog be able to recognise all nine key sounds, and be constantly poised to respond to them, but it must be prepared for a life in the public eye. Hearing dogs must remain calm and obedient in situations (for example, in a crowded supermarket) that many dogs would find overwhelming. Most even learn to "hold it in" for lengthy periods when travelling on planes and public transport.

The real test comes when a hearing dog begins life with its new owner. The association carefully matches dogs to prospective recipients, but it's not until the two meet and start to form a bond together that the compatibility between dog and owner can truly be determined. Only in a few cases in the last 30 years has the match between dog and owner been anything less than successful.

For Elizabeth and Chris, the Hearing Dogs program has enriched their lives beyond all expectations. "Before I received my first hearing dog I was dependent on other people," explains Chris. "A hearing dog gave me the confidence to move out of home and pursue further education. And I've been able to travel all over Australia. People warm to the presence of Ivy [my current hearing dog] and we often become the centre of attention. She's allowed me to interact with a lot more people. Ivy is my best friend."

To find out more about Lions Hearing Dogs or to make a donation, contact the Lions Hearing Dogs Centre or your local Lions Club.

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INNER DOG

WITH SAMI LUKIS



Bubbly media personality, Sami Lukis, is probably best known as a presenter on Channel Nine's TODAY show and most recently, as co-host and newsreader for Sydney's Triple M Breakfast show.

Sami is also a devoted dog lover, and her little bundle of white, fluffy joy, Lolli is never far from her side. We wanted to find out a little more about Sami and her Inner Dog.

Where did you find your dog or how did they find you?

I'd always heard the saying "You don't choose the dog. The dog chooses you". And that's exactly what happened with Lolli. The minute I picked her up I just knew she was my dog. It was an instant connection ... love at first sight!

What's the best thing about your dog?

She makes me laugh out loud every single day.

What's the best thing you've taught your dog?

I'm especially proud that I've taught Lolli not to be a food scab. She doesn't beg for food ... ever!

And I've taught her how to be a "model" model. As the Australian ambassador for the COMFORTIS flea treatment range, she's spent more time than the average dog on photo shoots. And she's always very well behaved.

What's the best thing your dog has taught you?

She's shown me what unconditional love is. And she's taught me that a cute white fluffy dog with a pink diamante and pearl collar - is NOT a particularly effective way of attracting (straight) single men.

If she could change one thing about herself what would it be?

I think she would probably like to be a little tougher around the other dogs in the park. She's a bit of a wuss.

What is her most treasured possession?

A raw chicken wing. When she's about to devour one of these little treats, she will guard it with her pretty little life.

If you believe in reincarnation what would she have been in a previous life? What will she be in her next?

Best in Show - in her last life. And Best in Show - in her next.

If she was to describe you in under ten words what would she say?

Sam is my best friend in the whole wide world.

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