

DEAF DOGS

Deaf Dogs Hear with Their Hearts

BY CHERESE COBB, FREELANCE WRITER

On November 20, 2010, Christina Lee grabs her camera and heads to her local shelter. She plans on capturing a new litter of puppies' tail-wagging, tongue-hanging, drool-dripping charms. Then Rebecca Custer, the Director of the Salem Animal Shelter in Salem, Virginia, takes her back into the isolation wing of the shelter and shows her an 8-week-old, snow-white Boxer. Odd-eyed, the puppy is "deaf in both ears," and was dumped by the river on Front Street. "She had been out to my farm [Bluebird] and knew I had secure, 6-foot-tall dog fencing and a big yard in the back of my house," says Lee. "She asks me if there was any way my husband Chris and I could adopt this dog."

However, Lee already has three dogs and three horses, and she doesn't know anything about training a special needs dog. "I went home that evening and told my husband Chris the story of the skinny, white, deaf Boxer," ex-

plains Lee. As a huge dog lover, Chris tells her to immediately call the shelter. "All you could hear on the other end of the phone was all the girls who work at the shelter screaming with joy," Lee laughs. Afterwards, the couple goes to

||
 "It was almost like I didn't
 have a purpose before
 Nitro came along"
 ||

PetSmart. They buy a cart full of dog supplies and a dog tag engraved with the name Nitro. [Fifteen years earlier, the couple decided if they ever had a boy dog, they'd name him Nitro after Nitro, West Virginia.]

When Christina brings Nitro home, she doesn't know any sign language. So, she watches a video on YouTube by American Sign Language interpreter Alisha McGraw who demonstrated all the

ASL signs she uses with her deaf Boston Terriers and deaf Boxer. "With Nitro, the biggest challenge I faced was his detachment, even as a 10-week-old puppy. He would not look at me and didn't seek attention when we first adopted him," says Lee. "My husband talked me off the ledge and suggested we find a good training facility so we could take him to puppy classes."

They enroll Nitro at the Field of Dreams training center in Roanoke, Virginia. People think deaf dogs are harder to train or are more aggressive than hearing dogs when they're startled. "In reality, they are 20 percent less likely to be aggressive," Lee says. "They are not distracted

by noises or barking [so] they are way more focused on their handler in a dog training class environment." As a result, Nitro skyrockets to the top of his class. The local news station WDBJ covers him, and he quickly becomes a national ambassador for deaf dogs.

"We start hearing from people all over the country that have questions about living with a deaf dog and training a deaf dog," Lee says. After learning breeders automatically put 3-to 4-week-old puppies to sleep just because they're deaf, she asks her husband, if, for her birthday present, they can launch Deaf Dogs Rock, a nonprofit that advocates for deaf dogs in the U.S. and Canada, providing education, transportation, medical care and sponsorships.

For the past six years, Lee has put in 60 to 70 hour weeks. She has a one-acre deaf dog park that's "specially fenced in for dog owners if they don't feel comfortable going to a normal dog park." And she has adopted three more deaf dogs: Bowie, after David Bowie; Bud, after Buddy Holly; and Chris, after Chris Cornell. She also completed a full, immersive semester of ASL at a local community college.

Then after building a Facebook community with roughly 53,000 followers, she was able to find homes for more than 2,000 deaf dogs—they're also called velcro dogs because they not only stick to their humans, but they cling to the other dogs in the family.

"Deaf dogs don't just hear with their hearts, they'll change every aspect of your life," says Lee.

"It was almost like I didn't have a purpose before Nitro came along."

