

Fast Forward

Glenn Martyn

Dog Training Director,
Bergin University for Canine
Studies; Former Training Co-
ordinator and Director, SF/
SPCA Hearing Dog Program

An upcoming Club speaker (watch program listings) discusses the importance of hearing dogs in the Bay Area.

Q: What difference can a trained dog make in the life of a hearing-impaired person?

A: By letting a deaf or hard-of-hearing person know about important sounds like the telephone, smoke alarm or someone at the door, a person's independence and quality of life are greatly improved. People report that their social contacts with people also improve due to having a trained hearing dog in their lives.

Q: What is the biggest challenge about training hearing dogs?

A: Well-trained hearing dogs alert people to sounds in an enthusiastic and consistent manner. If you choose a good candidate for training and properly train the dog, the results are spectacular. However, there are several challenges.

First, finding the "right dog" is not always easy. Not every dog has the potential to become a good hearing dog. It takes a combination of a friendly, stable temperament – with no significant fear or aggression issues – as well as high trainability. Hearing dogs ... should also show a natural, positive reaction to unusual sounds.

Second, you need to match each trained dog with "the right person," so the two form a strong bond and become an effective working team. Matching the right dog with the wrong person just doesn't work.

Q: How big is the need for these dogs in the Bay Area?

A: Our waiting list at SF/SPCA averaged



Photo courtesy of Bergin University of Canine Studies

60 to 75 people and included people from both California and Nevada. [Their] wait time was one to two years.

Q: Where do trained dogs come from?

A: Most hearing dogs have historically come from shelters and rescue organizations.

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This is because of the early involvement of American Humane of Colorado in the training and placement of hearing dogs. Others have since followed this “shelter dog” model. There are only a few organizations that primarily train hearing dogs.

Q: Some people in San Francisco recently became worried when the SF/SPCA closed its highly regarded hearing dog program. Who is picking up the slack in the area?

A: The San Francisco SPCA Hearing Dog Program graduated 812 dogs since 1978. It was the third hearing dog program established in the U.S. and was well-known and highly respected throughout the world. When the program was abruptly shut down, there was a tremendous outcry and heartfelt support for the program. Unfortunately, the program was not restored.

In recognition of the great need for more hearing dogs, former staff, volunteers and graduates of the SF/SPCA program recently formed a new, stand-alone nonprofit corporation, The Hearing Dog Program, [to] continue the important work of providing well-trained hearing dogs.

Bergin University of Canine Studies will be adding an expanded hearing dog component to its assistance dog curriculum. Students from throughout the U.S. will receive hands-on instruction on how to select, train and place hearing dogs, thereby enabling them to return to their own communities to provide trained dogs to people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Q: How did you get involved in the world of hearing dogs?

A: I became involved with the training and placing of hearing dogs in 1987. Our program was a part of Community Medical Center's Rehabilitation Center in Missoula, Montana.... Prior to starting this program, I ran my own private dog training business and was involved in training movie, police, search-and-rescue, field and competition dogs. Skills acquired in these areas were helpful with teaching dogs to alert people to important sounds.

Interview by John Zipperer.