

Emphasizing the *paw*sitive!

My hearing loss crept up on me unnoticed over a few years, until my ENT doctor and an audiologist confirmed that I had a mild to moderate hearing loss. Fortunately, the loss is progressing slowly and I started wearing hearing aids a few years ago, on and off. It took a long time to accept them after finding ones that suited me.

The last three years of participating in the Speechreading classes was a wonderful experience. The instructors (Eva and Jill) provided us with so much information on a variety of topics and I met wonderful people at these courses. During this time, I realized there was more of an impact from my hearing loss than I had thought.

Taking these courses has also given me the confidence to do what has now greatly changed my life. I live alone and have always had dogs and been involved with dog activities. When my last dog died, I decided that I would no longer have one, but it was hard to get used to being alone. I also noticed that I had relied on my dog for companionship and security: some good neighbors had just moved to Ontario, so I felt quite alone and nervous at night.

I decided to apply for a Hearing Ear Dog and discovered there is only one organization that trains them: the Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guides in Oakville, Ont. In the spring of 2016 I made my application and, after a lengthy waiting period, I was called to attend a training course with a matched dog selected for me. In June of this year, after graduating from a two-week training program, I returned home with my sweet, wonderful female black Labrador Retriever, Frisbee. She is my constant companion, my extra set of ears and my living, breathing ALD!

In the Fall I signed up for the next level of Speechreading. My thanks to Eva for her interest and support from the beginning and to Jill for introducing Frisbee and me to the group. During the introduction session, the following questions were presented:

Hanna Frohwein is a CHIP member who has been attending speechreading classes for several years.

Why did you apply for a Hearing Ear Dog?

I explained about my anxiety about living alone with a hearing loss and my extensive experience with dogs. I had heard about Hearing Ear Dogs and was also familiar with The Guide Dog program for visually-impaired people. At one time I had been a foster puppy trainer and felt this would be just the right thing for me.

What was involved?

I completed an application form, a medical form, provided a recent audiology report and two references. After about six weeks, I received a notification of acceptance in principle. The next step would be a home assessment visit, which only happened in the fall. Patience was needed.

About a month after my home assessment, I was notified that I had been accepted and would be given about six weeks' notice to go their center in Oakville for two weeks of training and orientation. **I WAS SO HAPPY, I COULD HARDLY BELIEVE IT.** But it turned out to be a very long wait. Even more patience was needed... as well as hope and perseverance.

What is the cost of the training program?

The total cost of a dog guide is about \$25,000.00 per dog. However they are provided free of charge to their new handlers. This fee includes the breeding program, puppy rearing and training during the first year.

Puppies are fostered by volunteer foster parents during this time. At about one year of age, they return to the center for at least six months training in one of six programs (for various disabilities or conditions)

The training of the client with the matched dog, depending on the program, lasts two to six weeks. During this time, the client is given free board and lodging at the center and free transportation from anywhere in Canada to the center and back home with their dog, when and if they graduate.

The costs include a follow-up home visit from the trainer and support on a continuous basis.

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What breeds are used?

The breeds used are mostly labrador retrievers, golden retrievers, standard and miniature poodles and golden labrador mixes. They occasionally use another breed from another facility.

What sounds are Hearing Ear Dogs (HED) trained for?

They are trained for seven common household sounds: door knocking and doorbell ringing, alarm clocks, timers, name calling, telephone ringing, a crying baby and smoke alarms. Other sounds might be added, depending on the client's needs.

How does Frisbee notify you?

When she hears the sound, she will notify me by touching me with her paw or nose or even jumping up. When she gets my attention, she will take me to the source of the sound, getting a good reward and praise each time.

In the case of a fire/smoke alarm, she must act differently, by first notifying me with touch but instead of going to the source she will spin in a circle to get my attention. Whenever we practice this, she gets a big reward, a special treat and extra praise, then we leave the location. She then gets a special play toy and play-time.

How is the public expected to act in the presence of a Dog Guide?

This applies to all Guide Dogs/Service/Assistance Dogs. You can recognize them: a dog guide will be wearing the official vest or harness from a nationally-approved training facility and the handler will have an official ID from the training facility. The Hearing Ear Dog Guide (HED) will be wearing an orange vest with the Dog Guides logo and an indicator that he/she is a Hearing Ear Dog. All Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guides will have on their vest the logo and name of the specific program they are trained for. When in a public area, they will **always be on a leash** and attentive to their handler. They will never be off-leash in public.

These dogs are entitled to go in to public areas with their handler. **They are not pets** and are trained to be obedient to their handler and ignore people around them while working.

If you meet dog guides, please do not pet them, talk to them or offer food. This might distract them from their work and, if frequent, might stop them from working, especially in the early months of being with their new handler. You may talk to the handler, who will be only too happy to answer any questions, but please do not ask them any personal questions regarding their disability or reason for having their dog guide. However if the Handler needs or asks for help, they will always be appreciative.

What advice do you have for anyone interested in becoming a Dog Team (Dog and Handler)?

I am not in a position to give advice, as I am very new to this. But from my experience so far, I can say that the waiting time is long and there are a number of

stages in the waiting period. You will need patience and more patience.

Be ready for a big-time commitment. This not a short-term project. You must have a genuine love for dogs, even if you are not necessarily experienced. Although experience is an advantage, you will get training at the center. Be aware of the responsibility, time and dedication needed. Involvement and cooperation of the immediate family is essential. Your physical environment must be suitable for a dog - ideally a fenced-in yard or at least a suitable opportunity and space for exercise and play. Be prepared to find plenty of time for training and play time for your dog, lots of praise and love. After all, he/she is still a dog and needs to be one. And be aware of the significant cost of care and feeding, plus veterinary expenses. Once you have your Hearing Ear Dog home, all those expenses are yours.

For me, it has all been worth it. I now have my beautiful, sweet Frisbee. I will never forget the experience and the time spent at Dog Guides in Oakville. The trainers and all staff were so

caring and helpful, it was amazing, and as a dog team now, I know they are always there to help and advise me.

Frisbee makes my days so much brighter. She is company and I feel so good knowing she serves as my extra ears. Having Frisbee also makes it much easier to advocate for myself and to let people know I am hard of hearing. I can point to her and say to my friend or anyone "I am hard of hearing that's why I have my friend Frisbee here at my side. Could you please repeat that?". Or "Speak a little louder please". Restaurants are now easier, too. I show them her vest and don't have to say much more. They take note.

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For more information contact Lions Clubs Foundation of Canada
www.dogguides.com • www.chiens-guides.com or
 Tel 1 800-763 3030.

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