



They may be deaf, but that doesn't stop these remarkable dogs from leading full, happy lives—and helping others.

By Jen Reeder

# “Hearing With

# Their

# Hearts”

Nitro (second from left) presides over the Deaf Dog Rocks pack at home.



Virginia resident Christina Lee had a few moments of panic in the first 24 hours after she and her husband brought a deaf Boxer puppy named Nitro to live in their home.

“He was kind of detached from me—he didn’t look to me or follow me and I was saying, ‘I think we’re in over our heads,’ ” she recalls. “My husband, like he usually does, talked me off a cliff and just said, ‘You know what? We’ll get him into training and we’ll do all this cool stuff.’ ”

That’s exactly what they did. In class, Nitro didn’t take his eyes off her and quickly learned to follow signs for commands. Instead of using a clicker to positively reinforce good behavior, she’d hold up a treat between her thumb and forefinger to signal “OK.” He excelled in AKC S.T.A.R. Puppy classes and passed the Canine Good Citizen test at just 10 months old.

“Nitro loved every bit of it,” Lee says. “If you teach him something, you can see it in his face. He’s like, ‘I know what you want!’ ”

Nitro went on to enjoy trick and agility classes, and soon a local TV station caught wind of the inspiring pup and featured him in a news story that went viral. Lee started getting emails from other owners of deaf dogs looking for advice, and she realized the community needed an educational resource.

The idea for Deaf Dogs Rock was born.

The website [deafdogsrock.com](http://deafdogsrock.com) launched on Lee’s birthday on August 1, 2011—naturally, Nitro is the Chief Executive Dog. The site, which has the slogan “Deaf dogs hear with their hearts,” shares training tips, videos, success stories, and other information about caring for deaf dogs.

“We live and breathe positive reinforcement,” Lee says. “We concentrate on ‘Watch me’ training so they’re conditioned just to watch you all the time.”

That way, the dog can see a sign for sit, come, or another command and comply. The site also shares fun reasons why “Deaf Dogs Rock,” such as “Deaf Dogs Rock because you can do a big construction project in your home and they never hear the nail gun, hammer, or saw!”

Deaf Dogs Rock also sponsors deaf dogs at risk of being euthanized, getting them out of shelters and into special-needs dog rescues where they can get the training they need to prepare for forever homes. About half of the dogs transfer to the Virginia-based nonprofit Green Dogs Unleashed, which trains special-needs dogs for therapy work.

Erika Proctor, director and animal behavior specialist, says deaf dogs make excellent therapy dogs because when one sense is missing, the other senses are heightened.

“Often with our deaf—and our deaf and blind—dogs, the sense of touch is huge for them, which means that they very often seek out affection from people in a way that even the typical dog might not,” she says. “And there’s a whole aspect that deaf dogs don’t need to worry about, such as sirens, the beeping of medical equipment, angry yelling, children screaming, that kind of chaos.”

Proctor founded the nonprofit because she too was inspired by a deaf dog. Over a decade ago when she lived in Washington State, a deaf Great Dane puppy was tossed out of a truck window in front of her training facility. Two different veterinarians suggested euthanasia, but Proctor was determined to train the dog she named Serendipity.



Lee (left) with Angels of Assisi Rescue trainer Bobbie Wiggins Patterson with deaf dog Harper

COURTESY DEAF DOGS ROCK

The sweet dog learned hand signals and became a beloved pet. Then one day, a friend's nonverbal autistic child hugged Serendipity and—having never before spoken a word—said “I love you.” Proctor realized that dogs with special needs can provide an extraordinary bridge to people with special needs.

“There is no stigma (of disability) to the dog. There’s no, ‘Woe is me. I can’t hear,’ ” she says. “Dogs don’t think that way. ... When you have a special-needs individual who is working with a special-needs animal, and you can break the stigma together, it transcends a plane that we just don’t understand.”

### Deaf Dog Parker

When McKenzie Haislip became the program director Camp Holiday Trails, a camp for children with medical needs, she knew she wanted to get a dog to be part of the experience. Through Green Dogs Unleashed, she learned about Parker, a black Poodle mix, who was bitten by a scorpion when he was a puppy. For a time, he lost some of his mobility, sight, and hearing, but fortunately regained everything—except his hearing.

“I knew that Parker would be the perfect dog for our kids to be able to connect to, who have been through their own medical crises and have health conditions as a result of those crises,” she said.

“Parker is very smart and playful. He knows how to read situations and behave accordingly,” she says. “He loves people. He loves other dogs. He’s particularly fond of children and is really loveable.”



### Deaf Dog Mara

Chicago resident Barbara Braden had never owned a deaf dog when she offered to foster a deaf Australian Shepherd named Mara during heartworm treatments. The 4-year-old dog was also blind in one eye, but it was clear from the start that she was extremely intelligent and gentle. Braden and her husband adopted Mara and taught her hand signals. Soon she passed the Canine Good Citizen test and became a therapy dog certified by Alliance of Therapy Dogs.

For nearly two years, Mara and Braden have spread cheer to staff and patients at senior centers, a mental health clinic, and a hospital where they visit almost every department, including pediatric emergencies.

“People are very interested to hear Mara’s story and see that she’s such a sweet and calm dog,” she says “I think she provides a bright inspiration to people who are having a bad day or not feeling their best.”

In one memorable encounter, the team entered a hospital room in which a seemingly depressed young woman lay curled in the fetal position. But when Mara entered, the patient jumped out of the bed and dropped to the floor to pet the dog. The girl’s mother and grandmother exchanged a glance and one whispered, “This is just what the doctor ordered.”

“Mara loves her work and then she loves to come home and take a nap,” Braden says. “She has proven, despite her handicap, to be a very sweet and very trainable dog. Just a lovely companion to our family, too.”

TOP: COURTESY KATE BRADEN; BELOW: COURTESY MEG PHILLIPS

## Deaf Dog Karl

A deaf Boxer named Karl was only 3 weeks old when Joanne Hart-Rittenhouse heard he would be euthanized. She instantly volunteered to give him a home—something she's done for eight other deaf dogs since because her experience has been so positive.

"I love having deafies," she says. "They sleep through everything and don't mind thunder or fireworks."

In fact, being deaf has helped make Karl a terrific therapy dog for a special job: supporting children who have to testify about abuse at court trials. Through a nonprofit called Companions for Courage, Karl accompanies kids in four circuits in Florida—wearing a silly hat to put each child at ease. While testifying, the children take off their shoes and rest their feet in Karl's fur for constant reassurance. Since he can't hear, Karl doesn't startle at the banging of a gavel or if someone starts crying.

For one recent case, a defense attorney didn't want the jury to see a dog and possibly be swayed. So Karl and Hart-Rittenhouse had to lie on the floor and hide in the witness stand



during a long trial involving a special-needs child.

"I was so concerned that Karl was going to make a noise, because we didn't want a mistrial. I just kept giving him the sign to go to sleep, and he did," she says. "She had her feet on him the whole time. He was such a little hero."

Green Dogs Unleashed dogs have gone on to help veterans with PTSD, children with disabilities, seniors with dementia, and hospital patients. One deaf and blind Cocker Spaniel named Buttons was featured in Animal Planet's 2018 "Puppy Bowl" for her work in a reading program for special needs children and was adopted by a family that is continuing her therapy dog training.

Proctor says working and living with deaf dogs can be incredibly rewarding.

"The difference is how you communicate, but there's not a lack of communication as long as you're willing to put that effort in," she says. "There's nothing I enjoy more than working with deaf and blind dogs." **FD**

For more information, visit: [DeafDogsRock.com](http://DeafDogsRock.com)  
and  
[GreenDogsUnleashed.org](http://GreenDogsUnleashed.org)

## Keeping a Deaf Dog Safe and Secure at Home

Susan Cope Becker, author of *Living with a Deaf Dog*, noted that many owners of hearing dogs might someday have their dogs become deaf due to aging. Whatever the cause of a dog's deafness, there are ways to help ensure a relaxed, safe environment at home, including:

- Fence the yard and post a sign that mentions you have a deaf dog and that the gate must remain securely closed. Let meter readers and other regular service professionals know the importance of keeping it shut.
- Teach visiting children to move slowly and not jump or wave their arms.
- Post a copy of the hand signals you use with your dog so that the entire family and visitors can refer to it.
- Crate train.
- Introduce your dog to neighbors and explain she is deaf and needs help if found loose outside.
- In addition to microchipping, have an ID tag made. For her deaf Boston Terrier, Spanky—who inspired the book—she had a tag made that read, "Spanky is deaf. Hold and call (phone number)."
- Do not approach your dog from the rear—they need to see you coming to avoid being startled.
- Wake your dog by gently blowing in her face.
- Install a nightlight in your room so your dog can see you (particularly important in case of separation anxiety).

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She shares her home office in Colorado with her husband and their two dogs, Rio and Peach.