

# Willa, the Home Schooled Hearing Dog

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***Puppy Willa, 8 weeks old, with her first vest***

Hearing Dogs alert to sounds by performing two tasks: telling the partner that an important sound is occurring and then leading the partner to the source of the sound. As someone with a 50% hearing loss, I struggle both with processing sounds and with locating them. I also rely heavily on context clues and on lip reading for understanding speech (I tell people that without my glasses, I'm completely deaf). Even so, I would not be eligible to receive a trained dog from most assistance dog organizations, which

have long waiting lists for people who have some hearing. Fortunately, with masterful guidance and generous support from Corally Burmaster, I've been able to train my own. My Hearing Dog, Coldstream Undaunted Willa RA, helps me by telling me about significant sounds in my environment so I can react appropriately. Willa is my second Airedale Hearing Dog. My first, Shaireab's Postmodern CD (Toby), was my helper and



**Jessica and Willa**

companion for 9 years. She was also my first dog, and I remain grateful to Sharon Abmeyer for giving me a chance even though I didn't have Airedale experience or a fenced yard, and for mentoring me in my journey with Toby. In accordance with training philosophies prevalent at the time, I didn't have Toby evaluated for assistance work until she was 18 months old. Richard Picone of American Dog Training in Atlanta, GA did the evaluation and subsequently became our trainer. He was willing to work with an Airedale and saw Toby as an individual with potential while other trainers I consulted dismissed us out of hand. Although Airedales may not be suited for the repetitive demands of Guide Dog work, their tenacity and independence make them great candidates for other types of assistance work. Toby and I had a successful partnership (see article in *American Airedale* 2002 No. 1 Jan-Mar) and she was very dear to my heart. When she died suddenly, I lost not only a good friend, but a vital link to the world around me. I really couldn't be without a Hearing Dog for the two years it had taken me to

raise and train Toby. Fortunately, with the innovative methods of raising and training puppies that are now available, I didn't need to be.

Willa's preparation for her work began with the incomparable foundation provided by Corally's Puppy Headstart program which was designed to provide the maximum amount of early environmental enrichment during the puppies' first eight weeks. Willa was selected for me not by temperament testing, but because Corally observed that from the time her eyes and ears opened, Willa fairly bounced toward new sounds and situations to see what was going on (see sidebar). Her comment to me when I picked up my puppy was "Most of the developmental periods occur in the first sixteen weeks. The first eight weeks are my responsibility. The second eight weeks are yours!"

Willa was 8 weeks old when she came home on a Friday wearing her service vest; on the following Monday, she was at work with me. Thanks to the support of my employer, Anne Arundel Community College, I was able to literally raise Willa on the job, where she was exposed to a marvelous cross-section of humanity, as well as countless sounds, smells, surfaces, and experiences. Willa didn't consider this a lack of a puppyhood, though. She thought it was normal to grow up on a college campus (both of my parents are college professors, so I thought it was normal, too!). I made it a full-time job to take advantage of the sensitive developmental period in Willa's life. I kept a weekly journal in which I noted the different types of people, animals, places, and experiences Willa had been exposed to, as well as training progress, challenges, and general observations. This was a lot of work for me—for Willa it was just fun: the world was her puppy pen.



### ***Willa's alert for Jessica***

Toby was sensitive to sounds but didn't have that necessary early exposure to make her rock solid in any situation. While I was able to channel her high sensitivity into performing hearing alerts and making me more aware of my surroundings, that same sensitivity presented challenges in Toby's public access role. New situations were sometimes stressful for her, and (caa train) that I felt were beyond what I could ask of her. And because I followed the traditional thinking, her assistance training didn't begin until she was over 18 months old. Toby eventually did learn 4 alerts, each of which took 6-8 weeks to teach, and she was almost 28 months old before she became a serviceable Hearing Dog. Thanks to a better understanding of early environmental enrichment, sensitive developmental periods, and the use of operant conditioning (e.g., clicker training), working with Willa has been a very different experience.

With Willa, I began clicker training immediately, and by 12 weeks she had learned the pawing behavior that would become her alert. At not quite six months, she started learning actual hearing alerts but without my putting pressure on her to perform consistently. Once she was mature enough to take responsibility for her behavior, alerting became expected rather than simply appreciated. Willa was already helping

me a full 12 months before many service dog organizations take their dogs back from the puppy raisers to *begin training* for assistance work, another tremendous advantage to training my own dog. She had 3 alerts by 11 months and now, at 3 ½ years old, she has close to a dozen with more to come.

The way Willa communicates with me is consistent regardless of the type of sound she is alerting to—she paws my leg and then helps me find whatever prompted the alert. She can tell me when my home phone, cell phone, or office phone rings; she alerts to my alarm clock, the teakettle, and someone at the door; and she can tell me when I've dropped something (like car keys or a credit card) or when someone in a different part of the house wants me to come to them. In addition to performing formal alerts, she lets me know when someone is walking/biking/jogging up behind me (particularly men and particularly in the early morning or at night), when someone approaches my car, when we are coming up on someone on a trail, and when something isn't as it should be (for example, when my sump pump was malfunctioning).

Part of the reason it took so long to teach Toby each alert is that our trainer wanted her to perform a different behavior in response to each stimulus: dropping into a down for a 2-way seek, barking and then taking my hand for a door knock, and moving her body into me to indicate that a car was coming up behind us; when I taught the teakettle alert myself, I had Toby paw my leg. Therefore, Toby could not really build from what she learned with one alert and apply it to another; each alert had to be taught from square one. In contrast, with Willa, I chose to use clicker training to establish an alert behavior (pawing) that means, "An important sound is happening" and then used the same protocol of having Willa bring me to the source of the sound. Once I did that, adding new alerts has

been relatively simple: “Here is a new sound that matters. When you hear it, do what you do.”

Because clicker training significantly speeds up the initial teaching, I have been able to devote more of our time to generalization, something I was not as successful with when I trained Toby. For example, the teakettle I used with Toby had an unusual whistle. When that specific whistle stopped functioning, we lost our teakettle alert. Willa’s alerts have generalized and shifted in a way that was not possible with the methods I used to train Toby. For example, when I had to get a new cell phone, it only took a few minutes and a single hot dog to impress upon Willa that this new sound was now “her” ringtone.

Alerts are strengthened through generalization and discrimination. Generalization for the cell phone alert, for example, includes alerting in the house, outside on a walk, when I’ve left the phone in another room, when other dogs are present, and when I’m standing at the kitchen sink, sitting at my desk, or using a vacuum cleaner. Discrimination means alerting only to *my* cell phone but not someone else’s or to a phone ringing on the television (I let my students think that Willa will alert to their phones, as well, as a way of trying to get them to turn the darn things off during class). One of the alerts we’ve been working on lately is having Willa tell me when my office phone rings. The discrimination aspect is differentiating between my office phone and that of my office mate or any of the other nine people in our suite. The generalization piece includes alerting when I am not at my desk (for example, getting coffee or standing in a colleague’s doorway) or when there are other people in the office with me. Sometimes, Willa generalizes on her own as when my mother is visiting and uses the teakettle. Willa alerts to my mother who has normal hearing but a bad tendency to forget about having put something on the stove. If I want Willa to alert to me when my mother is also in the house, I just call Willa



### ***Time to get up!***

over and show her that I’m the one putting the kettle on the stove.

The foundation provided by the first 16 weeks of environmental enrichment has also allowed Willa to happily adjust to experiences that cannot really be practiced, for example, flying. This past January, Willa and I flew round-trip from Baltimore to Ft. Myers, FL. She spent almost the entire flight resting on her settle mat by my feet (we had the bulkhead row), except for takeoffs and landings, when she put her chest and elbows in my lap to look eagerly out the window. My seat mate on the way back remarked wistfully: “It’s a lonely life.” When I asked for clarification, he replied: “These dogs have to work all the time, never get petted, and never get to play.” I assured him that Willa did, in fact, get to play with other dogs and interact with people. Although Willa takes her job seriously and I rely on her for my safety, Willa also gets to enjoy the perks of any beloved pet—play dates with other dogs, long walks throughout the day (I arrange my teaching schedule to make sure she gets her outings), and more toys than I care to count. She also enjoys swimming and being rowed around in her dinghy. In addition, she has the advantage of almost never being left at home; because of her early socialization, she can relax and rest under circumstances that would be stressful or overly stimulating for

another dog, for example, during a multimedia presentation or at a rugby match. As long as she's where she can keep an eye on me, she's at home. But it speaks to her ability to go into "work mode" that this gentleman found my exuberant and social girl self-contained and uninterested in him.

One of the activities we enjoy together is training for competition in Rally and Obedience. Willa is really good with context and is able to perform exercises correctly as well as keeping an ear out for important sounds. Crucial to Willa's versatility has been my decision to train with Corally at the Clicker Training Center, driving from my home in Baltimore to Leesburg, VA each weekend in order to be assured of having a trainer who understands that Willa's confidence in her ability to do her job must not be undermined by an insistence on absolute obedience. Whatever Willa can tell me (an alert) is simply more important than what I've just asked of her (Guide Dog trainers refer to this phenomenon as

"intelligent disobedience"). Along similar lines, Willa's desire to keep an eye on me often puts her sits slightly off kilter; we've decided to take the ½ point deductions.

Although I did not really have a choice about "home schooling," I have come to believe that—at least for me—it is superior to getting a dog from an organization. Leaving aside the opportunity to share my life with an Airedale as opposed to the typical Golden or Labrador Retriever, I have more years with her. There's also something really special about training one's own partner. I feel that in raising Willa from a pup and being primarily responsible for her training, I have been the beneficiary of a unique relationship between the two of us. On the one hand, Willa allows me to live alone; on the other hand, I don't think of myself as living alone because I have Willa—a skilled Hearing Dog, but also a treasured friend and a wonderful companion. She has redefined what I thought possible in training and in loving a dog.