

Great Life Lessons From Deaf Great Danes

BY BETSY GLICK

While talking with my friend Dayna about the four Great Danes she rescued—two of whom are deaf—it struck me: There’s a lot that those of us with hearing loss—and the people in our lives—could learn from her experiences with deaf dogs.



Following are Dayna’s stories, along with my own thoughts on how I relate to what they go through, vis-a-vis being misunderstood around new people, constantly scanning for visual cues, gravitating toward people who are compassionate and building close relationships.

How It All Started

After first seeing Plato, the Great Dane in the movie *Max Dugan Returns*, Dayna fell in love with the goofy yet majestic breed. Once she began volunteering with the Mid-Atlantic Great Dane Rescue League, it wasn’t long before she ended up adopting one of her own.

Dayna knew how difficult it can be to place physically disabled and older animals. So when it came time to adopt her first, she took home Cain. He was a blue Great Dane, the color of storm clouds, who was never able to stand up straight due to having been crated for too long.

Even then, Dayna knew it was only a matter of time before she’d rescue others. She compares her love of Great Danes to potato chips: “You can’t have just one.”

Ultimately, she adopted three more: Oliver, a blue-eyed deaf harlequin Great Dane; Kingston, a healthy male brindle Great Dane; and Willow, a gorgeous deaf but sassy and strong mixed merle and harlequin Great Dane.

Deaf Great Danes Oliver and Willow. Photo credit: Dayna Sepeck

When Willow first joined the family, she quickly made it clear who was boss. She marched up to Oliver, the largest of the group, and smacked him across the face with her paw. He looked at her for a quick second, thinking, “Well, how do I feel about that?” Then he accepted that she’d be in charge.

Ever since, Willow has kept the boys in line. She keeps a watchful eye over Oliver and is always there to report Kingston to Dayna if he gets too rough with Oliver. A strong-willed female, Willow is quick to tell Dayna—very loudly—what she wants her to know.

Learn How to Communicate

Before deaf dogs can learn hand signals, they need to be trained to consistently look at their owner. And owners need to stay within their sights. This is important because it helps keep deaf dogs from walking into danger or getting into trouble in other ways, like eating something harmful. Dayna uses American Sign Language with Oliver and Willow, combined with standard dog hand signs, much the same as when training a hearing dog.

The positive byproduct of hand signals and constant visual cues and touch is that Dayna developed very close relationships with her deaf dogs. When she needs to go somewhere, she motions where she’s going, whether it’s upstairs or into another room. That way, Oliver and Willow understand she’s coming back. It helps because deaf dogs can have a startle reflex or separation anxiety.

This rings true to my experience growing up with hearing loss. People with hearing loss need to see others when they speak. We need nonverbal clues and situational awareness. When it’s hard to hear, the eyes are an important tool for communicating.

Use Lights and Other Nonverbal Tools to Avoid Danger

A benefit of having a deaf dog is that noise like thunder or fireworks doesn’t draw their attention or scare them. Conversely, they can’t hear commands like, “Come.” Some deaf-dog owners flash porch lights when it’s time to come inside, much like a person with hearing loss might wire a doorbell or telephone with a notification light.

If you shake a box, close a cupboard, crinkle a bag or make any noise in the kitchen, most dogs come running

for food. With Oliver and Willow, it’s no problem. But that doesn’t mean deaf dogs aren’t mischievous. Dayna recounts her early experiences with Oliver. Even though he was regularly fed, he’d always search for food. Once, Dayna put a large pizza on the kitchen counter and then ran upstairs to change clothes. When she returned, the box was empty. There wasn’t a crumb left!

Oliver also learned how to unlock and open doors and cabinets. After discovering that he’d unlocked the front door, opened it, and walked out looking for her, Dayna immediately got a combination lock for the exit doors, a bungee cord for the garage door, and placed a dog-proof lock on the pantry.

Be Compassionate if They Talk Loudly

Dayna lovingly calls Oliver Chewbacca or Chewy because of the loud, funny sounds he makes. He’s very chatty. She often comes home to entire conversations. He seems to be saying, “Where have you been? How was your day? Where are my treats? I need to go out! Let’s take a walk. I’m happy to see you!” Compared to hearing dogs, deaf dogs are very vocal, Dayna says reflecting on personal experience with her animals. They talk constantly—and loudly.

I’m not exactly sure why deaf dogs do this, but I noticed that when I’m not wearing my hearing aids, friends tell me I talk louder. Maybe it’s because I can’t hear myself—and maybe that explains why Oliver barks loudly.

Acknowledging Their Hearing Loss Can Break Down Barriers

Oliver suffers from multiple genetic issues associated with irresponsible breeding, including spondylomyelopathy or wobbler syndrome, a disease of the cervical spine that affects how the dog walks. He also developed seizures.

Oliver wears a collar that says, “I’m deaf,” along with a harness, socks and booties to protect his paws, which drag due to the wobbler syndrome. Everybody asks questions about them.

Even though he was born with a lot of unlucky traits in the health department, nothing stops him. Oliver loves going anywhere, even into large crowds where he gets all the attention. Dayna calls him her little superhero. I suggested she get him a doggie costume with a Superman emblem on it. Wouldn’t that be a great conversation starter and educational tool?

Dayna observes that deaf dogs don’t know limitations. They don’t see challenges. They only see opportunities.



Oliver seeking food. Photo credit: Dayna Sepeck

Choose Friends Wisely

Every dog handles loss differently. When Oliver lost his first companion, Cain, he wasn't doing well being alone. He refused to go outside. Dayna could see he needed a new friend—someone to follow and mirror, and to give him the confidence he needed to succeed and enjoy life. So she adopted Kingston, a healthy and hearing brindle Great Dane.

Dayna believes that giving dogs with hearing loss a canine companion improves their quality of life and their ability to get around. Kingston was glad to show Oliver around—and Oliver was happy to have someone to follow.

Yet, each dog handles deafness differently. Depending on the dog, it might be difficult to introduce another dog—or even to take them to a dog park. “Deaf dogs don't always read signals the same way as hearing dogs,” Dayna says. “They can get hurt when they don't hear or understand growling or other signals.”

The same is true for people. Some are great around those of us with hearing loss. Others aren't. But why spend time with people who don't make any effort to understand you or help you out?

Keep Things in Perspective

When I asked Dayna what she thought raising deaf dogs would be like, her answer resonated with me. “People think it's going to be difficult. But truthfully, it isn't. That's really a misconception.”

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I guess what she's saying is that when Oliver and Willow treat their lack of hearing like a speed bump instead of a dead end, they find new routes that get them to their destination—much in the same way people do.

I recall how I learned to cope with my hearing loss growing up. I figured out ways to accomplish what I needed—whether it was moving closer to someone or something, asking people to move to or meet in a quiet location, or buying headphones when my bedroom clock radio was annoying other family members.

When people see someone who's deaf or blind, many take pity. Some even make fun. But Dayna says that when people see Oliver, they're inquisitive. Why is it so different for people than for dogs?

“Oliver gets frustrated,” Dayna says. “I know he does. It has to be difficult for him when he's not able to do the things other dogs do. But hearing loss doesn't change your life for the worse. It shouldn't prevent you from doing what makes you happy. Just live life, and enjoy like Oliver does.”

Exercise Patience

Dayna says that all her dogs have taught her love and patience. With Oliver and Willow, she learned how to understand their needs, the best ways to accommodate them, and she's adjusted her own expectations and actions. Learning to communicate with them wasn't much different than training hearing dogs.

People Dayna knew thought it was going to be so hard.

“No, it's not,” she says. “They don't know any different. They love me just the same. And I love them. Deaf dogs hear with their hearts.” **HL**



A lifelong lover of animals, Betsy Glick initially studied science with the dream of becoming a veterinarian. While at the University of Pennsylvania, she landed an internship at NBC. Upon graduating cum laude with a degree in communications, she embarked on a career in advertising and public relations. After winning awards and mounting successful media campaigns for government and nonprofit entities, Betsy rekindled her desire to work with animals and created Pets-By-Bets.com, an online storefront for her custom pet portrait business. Photo Credit: Janet Nash