

Colorado Critters

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Owners of deaf dogs speak own language

Hand signals aid communication

By Rebecca Jones

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Russ Anthony and his wife, Kymberly Ceres, got their deaf dog, Mia, the way most people get deaf dogs: They spotted the adorable little white puppy at a pet store.

A cross between an Australian shepherd and an Australian cattle dog, the 9-month-old Mia is just as cute as she can be. But no one told Anthony and Ceres that excessive whiteness in some breeds — particularly Australian shepherds and dalmatians — is closely linked to deafness, or that reputable breeders would never breed dogs likely to produce such a puppy. And if such a puppy were born, it almost certainly would be euthanized immediately.

But owners of puppy mills rarely do what reputable breeders would do. And so this little white puppy found its way to a pet store, where it was sold to the unsuspecting couple, who quickly grew attached to the dog.

But they soon discovered that something was wrong, and they were faced with an agonizing choice: return her to the store, knowing she would be euthanized; or attempt to raise a dog that could never hear a command, never hear her owners call for her, never hear the sound of an approaching car.

Rather than put her down, the



Steve Groer/News Staff Photographer

Littleton dog trainer Diane DuBose combines American Sign Language with hand signals to communicate with deaf dogs such as Spirit, her Australian shepherd.

Westminster couple found an alternative way to communicate with Mia. They speak to her using sign language.

That's also how Christine Andrews, of Thornton, communicates with Briar, her deaf Australian cattle dog.

RESOURCES

Resources for learning about deaf dogs:

- *Living With a Deaf Dog* by Susan Cope Becker (\$15.95)
- Web ring e-mail list: deaf-dogs@egroups.com
- Deaf Dog Education Action Fund: <http://www.deafdogs.org>
- Whiteness in Australian shepherds: <http://www.asca.org/Education/Advanced/whitedeaf.htm>

It's how Rhonda Champion, a sign language interpreter, speaks to Pebbles, her dalmatian.

It's how Diane DuBose, a Littleton dog trainer, speaks to Spirit, her deaf Australian shepherd. And DuBose is training other owners of deaf dogs how to sign to their dogs. She uses a combination of American Sign Language and the same hand signals good trainers have always used with their dogs.

"In the first week I had him, Spirit learned four signals," says DuBose, who recently organized the first deaf dog picnic ever held in the Denver area. Eleven deaf dogs attended — including Mia, Briar and Pebbles — and DuBose hopes the group can continue to meet regularly to train together.

In the eight months he's lived with DuBose and her other two Australian shepherds, Megan and Callie, Spirit has learned nearly 30 signals. Among them: "Sit" (an open hand, waist-high, swept up-

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Owners 'can't be lazy'

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ward toward the dog); "No" (a wagging finger, shaking head and a scowl on DuBose's face); "Stay" (an open palm facing the dog); "Cookie" (using the fingers and thumb to form a letter C); "Leave it" (sweeping the left hand over the right forearm); and "Good dog!" (rubbing a hand over the heart while smiling).

Megan and Callie, already trained through the top levels of obedience, already knew many of those signs. DuBose has just expanded her repertoire for Spirit's benefit.

"I want people to know how wonderful these dogs are," DuBose says. "Deaf dogs get a bad rap sometimes. They're not dumb. They just can't hear."

Russ Anthony says there are benefits to owning a deaf dog: "We can walk her through the neighborhood, where there are lots of other dogs, and she doesn't hear any of them, so she doesn't bark at them."

Andrews notes that it's also convenient to open a bag of something in the kitchen without

the dog hearing her and immediately wanting some of whatever she has.

"Of course, this means you can't be lazy. You can't rely on your voice to discipline your dog," she says. "For instance, if you get in the bathtub and you leave your socks on the floor, and she runs in and takes them, you can't just yell at her to drop them. You have to go and get her."

She says with a laugh that her other dog, Tucker, also an Australian cattle dog, seems to have "selective" hearing. He hears only what he wants to.

Andrews says training a deaf dog requires its owner to think like a dog. "When I was trying to train Briar to heel, she'd just sit and look at me. I had to stop and think, 'Why is she not understanding what I'm asking her?' And I realized the signal I was giving her looked too much like 'Stay.' I changed the hand signal, and she got it in one night."

For information on training deaf dogs, call Diane DuBose, (720) 981-0567.