

18th September 2019 – Ann Jillings and Varley the Dog – *Dogs for the Deaf*

At our September meeting Ann Jillings presented a very emotional talk on dogs for the deaf and certainly won the award for cute photographs! She was accompanied by Varley, a black Labrador who is partnered with her son Daniel who has been deaf from birth.

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People train dogs to alert deaf people to important and life-saving sounds they would otherwise miss – sounds that many people take for granted like the doorbell, alarm clock and even danger signals like the fire alarm. Being aware of these – thanks to a hearing dog – makes a real difference to deaf people's lives, and can even save them. Their dogs are distinctive in that they wear burgundy coats with the Hearing Dogs logo, which also signals to other people that the person they're with is deaf

Deafness can be a very isolating disability. A hearing dog can give a deaf person a new-found sense of independence and confidence now they have a loyal companion and a true friend by their side. Ann presented a couple of video case studies to illustrate the point.

As if this wasn't enough – hearing dogs have saved countless lives in their important role; fire alarms sounding at the dead of night, alerting them to the shouts of a loved one who is in peril, even saving their deaf partners from potential car thieves!

The dogs are bred by the charity, spend the first 8 weeks with their mother and then move on to a socialiser who uses reward based training to develop the puppies, initially with basic commands such as "Sit" and "Stay".

A hearing dog and their deaf partner need to be carefully matched to ensure the partnership will work well and this takes place after about 18 months of training.

So many little things need to be taken into consideration – for example, a bouncy, bubbly Labrador couldn't be matched with a 70-year-old lady with mobility problems. But that Labrador would make a great companion for a fit 35-year-old who loves going out jogging every morning.

The charity has matched thousands of dogs with deaf people since its humble beginnings in 1982. At the moment, there are almost 1,000 working hearing dog partnerships across the UK.

When a hearing dog retires at about the age of 11, their deaf partner is able to reapply for a new dog – and a lot of them keep their former hearing dogs as pets!

The cost to train and support each hearing dog throughout their lifetime is £40,000 – so the charity relies heavily on voluntary contributions to help change lives. It doesn't receive any government funding.

For more information visit www.hearingdogs.org.uk