

I Just Called To Say...

The names Ball, Bruce Ball, 4117 to you. I'm rather unique, being the only Pointer doing my job. Training was highly specialised and intense, four months, the places I can go are places most Pointers would dream of going, in fact around 6000 unique specially trained dogs in the UK can attend. The conversations and things I hear you wouldn't believe, because my recipient and owner can't hear them, he has to read them.

I'm a hearing dog, there have been 1500 of us trained in the last 27 years, while there are around 4600 guide dogs in active service, adding dogs that help people with physical disabilities and epilepsy to the party, we're known as registered assistance dogs.

Excuse me it's not normal for me to give interviews or talk about my specialist lifestyle and training, so I might miss bits you want to know, if so you can email me at askbruce@debrucie.co.uk emails from all most welcome.

Now you're asking why I got to where I am and what my work involves, let me start at the beginning.

In the very early hours of Sunday 30th March 2008 I was the first of six dogs and two bitches to enter the world in a very warm and comfortable kitchen that was to be my home for nearly twelve months on the outskirts of Salisbury in Wiltshire.

I soon discovered that in addition to my mum, brothers and sisters, my granny and big half sister lived there, as had my late big uncle Biggles, who to the upset of everyone died just a few days earlier at only three years of age. He sounded like a real star.

Being orange and white like everyone except granny and my beige brother 'Archie' I was part of the clan and being the eldest I took it upon myself to discover as much as possible and tell or show the others what I'd found.

The humans weren't too impressed at times, and indeed my now recipient/owner, David, used to call me some names so special no-one else ever called me them, that was until I discovered they weren't really very nice names. It upset me, but not for long.

Being the first out of the whelping box was in everyone's eyes, cute, so I didn't want to upset my audience.

Seemingly bypassing the child locks on all kitchen doors, opening the one under the sink, removing the plumbing, then on another occasion the whole waste disposal unit, including plumbing and electrics, chewing the dishwasher drain hose (it was there as well), ooooh and those rubber seals on the oven door (yummy) he couldn't buy them fast enough. Then I discovered I could use the oven door as a step to get on the work surfaces.

Everyone loved it when I made them coffee – well, except my breeder, Mandy who wasn't at all impressed. But I think all the humans thought I was clever, perhaps even a threat to them?

So I was always very clever and could think outside of the box, apparently David has some of these skills, I've yet to be convinced. Time will tell.

Whenever he sat down I'd creep up and snuggle onto his lap, never move, so he thought I was a good puppy, not the one who caused mischief. It worked. He took to me.

From what I gather (and having access to his confidential file at Hearing Dogs), a month before I was born David had discovered the Hearing Dogs for Deaf People website, over the space of six months a year earlier he had lost nearly all of his hearing, I can't imagine what that must be like, I used to bark for him to come and see me, thinking he was most rude not running at my call – now I know why. Deaf as a post, what use is that as a servant? But I did feel guilty for a moment.

Yes, the Hearing Dogs application, well at Crufts he stopped by and saw the work of my training academy, and liked what he saw, so the application continued. It was thought that he'd have one of my big sisters puppies from the following year and put it into training, however, Hearing Dogs told him they had space and did he have a puppy.

Step forward Bruce.

When Mandy first said about becoming David's hearing dog, I thought 'what, why can't he do that himself, why do I have to do that' then I took a few minutes to find out what the job involved, travel, meeting new people, visiting new places, going to Waitrose (and not waiting in the car), going to the hospital, well he comes to the vets with me, so it's only fair I discuss some interesting procedures on him with HIS doctors, dining in fine restaurants. Hmmmm sounds too good to be true and what's the catch, I have to be his ears. Well mine are pretty good, good enough for the two of us.

Mission accepted.

I took the close protection bit of him before assessment and training very seriously, following or if possible leading him everywhere, at the office between his office, the computer server room, boardroom, keeping an eye on him. Ah, that wasn't to protect him, it was because of the hearing loss his balance is a bit dodgy I wanted an escape route in case 6'2" of large human drops – he'd crush me, while I can move fast, downwards he can move faster than I can.. 4117 isn't stupid you know!

We got along famously and on December 25th 2008 his ownership was formally passed to me. He maintains he owns me, don't let that confuse you.

He vanished and apparently spent weeks cutting 28 laylandii down, clearing it away, installing fences and clearing the ground, making the house 'Bruce proof'. In March I duly arrived, the next morning woke up to breakfast and off for a walk, then back to

meet the home assessor for Hearing Dogs, a lovely lady called Julie, but I really wanted to be with my new slave, sorry, chum, er master, just to make sure he was doing things properly, grub was on time and stored correctly, right amount, some treats, walks, loved the forest, got me a new car, he was actually very good.

While making tea for the assessor, she asked if I was intelligent, knowing he was mutton Jeff I decided to answer for him. I flicked the handle on one of his kitchen draws with my nose, caught it and opened it, letting go of it, like magic it closed itself – so he wasn't the only one to possess these skills. Aha. Then I'd seen him open the big white cupboard on the other side of the room, there are two one is cold, the other is very cold.

I jumped up, rested my paw on the left hand (the very cold one) and hooked the right hand handle with my paw and stepped back, hey presto! It opened too! I let go and it closed all by itself, perhaps he has spells on things without touching them?

She seemed impressed, just as well, he just stood there mouth opened, actually, so did she... Hehe. Bruce is clever.

So, we were accepted, they even thought he needed my help, so much so a few months later they wanted me in for some serious interrogation, they called it intensive assessment. Whatever.

He wasn't happy, I didn't quite know what was going on, but the night before I set off, I decided to warm the bed up, in the middle stretched out, ooops, I dropped off, only to be woken by himself moving me over to my side.

Early next morning, bags packed, blankets in the car, we were off for a drive, office, Mandy's, we're going the wrong way for a walk, wish he'd discover there is a very good stereo in this Mercedes of mine, I could be listening to Radio 4 or perhaps a CD while he drives. Instead I sleep.

We arrive at this place a couple of hours later, he opens the boot, lets me out to stretch my legs, then puts me back in the car and goes off.

A while later he returns, puts my lead on and takes me in – there are other dogs here, some in flash coats, think I prefer my furry coat though.

Oh, I forgot, I'd had to go and see Howard (the vet, nice chap, South African, did a lovely job on my paw and made me bionic with my chip, while David and Mandy wandered off for an afternoon looking around Hearing Dogs training academy, leaving me to have my paw operated on) once for a check up and a spray thing up my nose, the second time, well, he nicked my nuts. The cheek!

Seemingly that was needed to get in to 'The Grange' Hearing Dogs HQ and training academy.

Here I was, here he is talking to this rather delightful young lady 'Gemma' well it took me 20 minutes, but he handed over the lead to her and it was ME walking off sniffing the roses chatting to Gemma NOT him – Mandy will be pleased of me.

What followed was me spending three days with this lovely lady, being put through my paces, being taken out and about, her sofa at home was jolly comfortable, not as good as my brand new one at David's though. The one I am no longer allowed on.

Thursday afternoon and who is there when I walk into reception, my old chum 'himself'. We went into the meeting room, my weaknesses were discussed, seemingly being careful near traffic isn't so good – I was puzzled, and jumping on her sofa was to change. Other than that I was good and I was to be offered a place, starting on Monday at the Hearing Dogs academy for unique dogs.

I was their newest recruit.

The first few days I was getting used to the place and my trainer 'Tom' a bloke, why not Gemma, or his boss Sarah, surely I need the highest level of training? Actually, he's a good chap and it was because David is a male that they have a male train me.

At nights during the first week I stayed at kennels, my 'socialisers' were just getting ready for me. And what a surprise, Angela, her husband and her two daughters, one working in the city and the other at university – bright and all lovely.

They too had been told I wasn't allowed on the sofa, so made me a lovely big fluffy bed, I had free run of their house, it was lovely, we went places, a brewery, walks in the country, into town, the river, everywhere. Their friends loved me too. I always tried to have a trick up my sleeve, something new so people don't get stale with the same old 'Have you seen him do, oh you have eh?!...' routine, 'keep it fresh' that's my motto. Keep humans on their toes.

Training progressed well, David visited a couple of times, took me out on all occasions, oh how like old times.

I remember the first time he took me in a restaurant, cheeky thing, he was staggered I just went along with him, didn't pull on the lead, didn't do the plate to mouth tracking routine, didn't beg, however, he could have got me some vet bed, that coir matting isn't too good on my behind or chest!

He finished eating, took his tray to the trolley and well, someone had left the bin lid open, had a quick look inside, couldn't see anything before he'd removed me. Another time.

Trying to guilt me, he came along the day before his birthday to see me, expecting to have a card or present I suspect, well, we hadn't been out that week and I didn't know he was coming until the day before, so nothing I could do. Besides expenses here are tight and we're not paid. Except food and rewards.

Training is tiring, I wouldn't have believed you beforehand, however, everything has to be done correctly, and being a big dog, there are ways I must attract his attention, but then David doesn't have feeling in parts of his legs, so I have a special way to tell him I need him.

Then there are all the sounds he knows he would normally hear around the home and the sounds that he should hear when out and about.

Ok, myth buster coming up, because we hear the telephone ring, we don't answer it, or chew it to stop it ringing – ooops, however, he has a special phone, one that has a display and keyboard, so that he types conversations and someone from BT (A Text Relay operator) relays that information via voice to the other person and what they say is relayed to David by the operator and David reads it on his screen – but boy are those conversations long!

I also work to the doorbell, not just barking, in fact I rarely bark at home,. When I hear the doorbell, the phone, the cooker timer, a text or email on his Blackberry (I have MY own sound) I go and tell David by getting his attention by touching him with my front paws and then taking him to where the sound is. There are other sounds and responses I am trained to.

'Call David' is where Mandy or anyone can tell me to go and find him, and bring him to them, for example when they want to know what he wants in his sandwich for lunch, waste of my time asking him if he wants a cup of tea, the answer is always 'yes'.

At night without his hearing aids he can hear nothing, in fact all the sounds I alert him too, even with hearing aids are inaudible to him. But at night I am there to protect him, if there is an intruder I warn him, if the smoke detector goes off I wake him up and tell him there is danger. When it's time to wake up I hear the alarm clock and wake him up, they have now bypassed my snooze button, this used to be where I climbed on the bed and went to sleep for another hour.

I think he likes me being around him all the time, certainly he never tells me to go away, and always seems to sleep soundly knowing I am there to tell him if there is a problem.

At night he switches the mobile off or to silent, so incoming emails don't disturb us.