



Training My Own Service Dog: A Conversation Jnanda Lampman and Caroline Spark

Jnanda Lampman and Teddy live and work together as a service dog team. Teddy came to live with Jnanda in April, 2009. Jnanda and her husband have lived on the central Oregon Coast since 1996. They have two grown sons and three grandchildren. Jnanda is recovering from a neurological illness. Having a service dog to alert her to her medical conditions, and accompany her in public has greatly improved her quality of life. This interview-style article evolved over several months, through mail and conversation, as Jnanda worked with Teddy and delved into clicker training.

How did you come to choose your dog?

I have been interested in the whippet breed for several years. An acquaintance of mine had a lovely pair of whippets that I got to meet on several occasions. I also had a couple of friends who owned rescued greyhounds and I was always impressed with their beauty and temperament. I decided a whippet would be a good size for me too.

After our previous dog passed at the age of 16, my husband and I waited for over a year, and then I decided I really would like to have another dog. I was able to locate a younger male whippet, 15 months old, needing a new home. We adopted him in April through a rescue group in our area. I did a two week trial period in the beginning, and felt confident enough to adopt him afterwards.

How did you get started training your Service Dog?

I am recovering from a neurological illness and have occasional seizures and problems with chemical and other triggers involving brain allergies and hypersensitivity. The first time I



had a seizure while out on a walk with my dog, he responded by sitting very close and focusing intently on me until help arrived. Then I noticed on other occasions that he would act restless at times and try to get me to leave places. Often when getting home I would feel ill or even have a seizure. I began to watch and observe his behavior, and came to see a predictable way that was occurring in him when I was over my threshold of physical safety. On occasions when I had a seizure, I began to time his pre-warning or alerting behavior, and he would often warn about 45 minutes before a seizure would occur. He also would alert me if I was somewhere that there were too many chemical smells for my nervous system to tolerate. I realized he would also alert if I was being over-exposed to heavy electro-magnetic pollution, such as in an enclosed space with lots of large appliances, which can give me nervous system symptoms and problems.

I consulted with Caroline and decided to pursue training him not only in obedience, but preparing Teddy for work as a Service Dog. We began a daily training schedule to work on basic obedience in and outside of the house, loose leash walking, and further observance of his alerting behavior.

Why do you think your dog was able to alert for your medical conditions?

I think this is somewhat due to the fact that we have spent all our time together from when I brought him home. He even sleeps with me nightly. This was all new to me, the breed, the clicker training and service dog training – I am no expert at all. I do feel his breed has helped in ways, since he is very aware and alert, and I know whippets are often called “Velcro dogs” so they are tuned into their owners and very attached.



What methods did you decide on to train your dog?

I started exploring training methods soon after adopting Teddy, for basic obedience instruction. It was then that I met Caroline and was introduced to clicker training. I knew punitive training was not for me and I was so thrilled to find a positive training approach. I briefly looked in to other materials, but anything aggressive and domineering in training just wasn't right for me.

How did working with a trainer help you train your dog?

Working with a trainer is extremely helpful. I am still a novice with training, and having someone professional to work with is really important if not essential, especially in person. There are so many things that a professional trainer can observe and help with in the training process, I can't even begin to express all the ways having a relationship with a trainer has helped me. The support and encouragement have also been huge, and help with problem solving – I would not have made it this far on my own.

What other resources were helpful to you in training your dog?

Well, I spent a lot of time on the internet. There are many sites with training articles and exercises, and lots of videos to look at, to see the training in process. YouTube is a good place to watch training videos. I also joined an online group for specifically training a service dog. In addition I went to my local library to check out any books they had on dog training, especially books pertaining to the clicker method.

How has training your own service dog affected you?

It has been a big experience for me. I was pretty overwhelmed in the beginning, and still am at times. There was a lot of information to learn and think about, but I began to try and take it in smaller steps and soon I found lots of support, both online and in person. If I didn't know about the clicker method I don't think I could have become a successful trainer or even attempted to train a service dog. I learned to appreciate the intelligence and intuitive abilities of my dog, which still amaze me to this day. I realized training is an ongoing process for both of us, and will never stop. I don't even think I can adequately answer this question, as there is so much to say on the subject. I think in two years, I'll have a lot more to say about how this has impacted my life. For now, I am learning a new skill and a new way of appreciating my dog and the talents he provides for me. I enjoy the mental/emotional and intuitive process of training my service dog. It was nothing like I had expected, and so much more.

What are some important things that you have learned?

I have learned that my dog is able to communicate in ways I never imagined. I am learning to observe, watch and listen to him. I am learning that the true limitations in this relationship and training have much more to do with my inabilities than with my dog's. I believe as more time passes, I will be better able to understand his language and messages, and that it will only improve what we are already doing and how he is providing a service for me, as a service dog.

What advice do you have for other people who are considering training their own service dog?

I think I got extremely lucky, to find the right dog on my first attempt, and for a trainer to come into my life, and that so many things then fell into place. Of course it is important to know what tasks you need your dog to perform, and then go about selecting the proper breed or disposition for this relationship. I know many professional trainers have great opinions about this process of selection, and I would definitely defer to them for help. And not just one trainer but get opinions from more than one if you can. I have seen many trainers give valid but varied points of view on this topic.

It's important to know the background and history of a dog, especially if you are acquiring them from a kennel, rescue organization or breeder. I think a trial period is a great idea, like I did. But even at that, it might take a while to find out if a dog is suited for the work you need. It's good to have a professional trainer observe your dog and discuss these points with you. If I was getting a puppy, I would want to talk to breeders that had bred especially for service dogs, and also get recommendations from others. Just ask, ask, ask, and try to do some homework before actually getting to the point where you are picking out a dog. Then I think it's important to determine if a dog is working out or not and to monitor the progress objectively. Not all dogs can do service work.

Is there anything in particular that you would recommend? Anything to avoid?

For me, it helped to decide on the type of training I wanted to do. Once I decided on clicker training and positive training methods, I stopped reading other material because I wanted to stick to a plan, and it was fortunately working well. I would avoid perfection and

frustration and cultivate lots of patience. It's also good to have the support of family and friends. I think it's especially important to have support in your household and a clear understanding of what is involved in training a service dog. It's not the same as pet ownership and basic training. It's important for others to respect the process and not interfere with what you are doing. I would try to find service dog classes or positive training classes that you can attend. Also read about different ways of teaching a skill. Sometimes one method will work better than another, even if they are both positive methods. There are many ways to train a skill. Don't be afraid to experiment with your own ideas in training, and your dog will also help you in this. They are individuals, and soon you learn how they learn best. I was not able to find a service dog class in my area, so I went online and found a group of people training service dogs. Get support. Have fun!

What's been difficult about training your own service dog?

Sometimes I just wanted someone to drop an already trained dog off on my doorstep. But I can truly understand why training your own service dog is wonderful and perhaps better in the long run. It's just a lot of work, and you have to keep at it. It's difficult if you don't have patience or the discipline to train daily or often. Really, every time you are with your dog is a chance for training, and certainly every time you go out the door is a chance for training. I have found my own lack of confidence has sometimes been the hardest part. I expect too much too quickly out of myself and my dog.

What is the best thing so far about training your own service dog? Any magic moments?

Some of the best moments have been when my dog understands what I want him to do, and he responds with over the top enthusiasm and exuberance. It's also those moments where I see progress after I have been stuck. There are magic moments when your dog starts giving you a new skill that you didn't even know he knew! My dog has learned all his medical alert skills on his own without training or prompting. Those have been some of the most rewarding moments, knowing he is really watching me and tuned into me, and seems to know how best to help me. A magic moment happens each time I understand more about my dog than I ever thought possible. I think the magic moments never stop.

