



Gifts of St. Bernice

My husband and I were only looking to spice up our relationship by introducing someone new into our lives. Being modern-day adventurers, we searched online and there she was – wearing a gorgeous coat, relaxing in another man’s arms, her dark eyes veiled by a mask. One phone conversation, an initial meeting, and 24 hours later we had a match.

Thus began life with St. Bernice. She was found by a rescue agency, wandering the city streets in a -40°C cold snap. It turns out she’s also 100-per cent hearing impaired.

Being adopted by an animal is one thing – being adopted by a four-month-old deaf St. Bernard pup is quite another. Luckily, ‘Duchess,’ our nine-year-old Great Pyrenees, has given us plenty of experience with gentle giant breeds. Duchess has also been an apt assistant in training Bernice to learn our hand signals and daily routines.

When we proudly announced our new addition, reactions ranged from unbridled enthusiasm to “What would they want a dog like that for?” Surely the naysayers had only our best interests at heart when contemplating Ber-

nice’s pending full-grown size and extra requirements.

Being raised by a pet that will be the same size as a Shetland pony is challenging at the best of times. Throw in a special-needs scenario and we’ve got ourselves a busy household.

Since we cannot gain Bernice’s attention with our voices, we must consistently jump up from the table, couch or bed to redirect her curious nose from our crotchety old cat, fascinating garbage cans, and our other dog’s food. Bernice has indeed become our full-time fitness program.

Bernice befriends and teaches everyone she meets. We recently visited with friends and explained to their six-year-old son that Bernice isn’t able to hear but has an increased sense of smell to figure out the world around her. He nodded solemnly in understanding.

Later that afternoon we all took Bernice for a walk, and were stopped by several people who wanted to shower her with attention. Our little friend wisely explained to Bernice’s admiring fans that she cannot hear them speak to her like we hear with our ears – Bernice hears through her nose.

To help us refine our communication skills, we are grateful to have found an animal behaviour specialist who teaches us to gain and keep Bernice’s attention so we can add to her bag of tricks and keep her active mind occupied. It turns out Bernice is extremely food-motivated and eager to please – a double bonus for those of us who don’t speak dog.

As a matter of fact, we speak to Bernice as if she’s a hearing dog – animals by nature read each other’s body language for behavioural intent and domesticated canines are no different. Bernice may be blissfully oblivious to sirens, heavy-metal music and screaming neighbourhood kids, but she’s hyper-aware of where my husband and I are at all times, watching us for established behaviour cues. Perhaps humans could learn a thing or two by hearing less and listening more.

For now, my husband and I are content to continue being trained by our gentle and growing beast, happy in the knowledge that our marriage now has just the right amount of spice.

ILLUSTRATION: NICK CRANE

This month’s Barks was written by Angela Blenkhorne, a freelance journalist who lives in Calgary with her husband and all-rescue fur crew.



Readers are invited to submit their 500-600-word commentaries to barks@dogsincanada.com.

Though all will be considered, not all will be published.