

« **DEAF DOG** jumps through hoops to inspire others

# A LANGUAGE ALL THEIR OWN



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**ANGELYNE, AN AUSTRALIAN CATTLE DOG**, leaps through a hoop while performing with her owner, Eric Melvin. Angelyne was born deaf and responds to more than 40 hand signals and nonverbal commands.

By Sherrie Peif

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It sounds like an act right out of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

But “Eric Melvin and Angelyne the Amazing Deaf Cattle Dog” is no act. And it’s nothing to laugh at, either, although it will bring a smile to the face of anyone who knows the pair.

For the past two years, five words in the English language have meant more to Melvin than any other: compassion, patience, focus, caring and giving.

Although those words have always meant something to Melvin, 38, of Windsor, it wasn’t until four years ago that they became a part of his daily life.

Today, Melvin works to make those words a part the lives of hundreds of schoolchildren, special needs children and adults by traveling the area to teach them that nothing is impossible if those words are taken to heart.

Searching for a four-legged companion four years ago, Melvin found what he thought was the perfect cattle dog — also known as a blue heeler — through a private breeder.

And he immediately started doing all the right things when he took his new playmate, Angelyne, to her first puppy kindergarten class.

At 13 weeks old, Angelyne didn’t respond the way she should have. When the dogs were sent off

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» To schedule a visit by Eric Melvin and Angelyne the Amazing Deaf Cattle Dog or to help sponsor Melvin with his project, call Melvin at (970) 222-4924 or e-mail him at [amazingangelyne@comcast.net](mailto:amazingangelyne@comcast.net)

» To view video of Angelyne at work, go to [www.mywindsornow.com](http://www.mywindsornow.com).

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A12: Angelyne

# Dog, its owner fetch inspiration

« **ANGELYNE**  
From A1

and then called to come back to their owners, she didn't respond. In fact, she didn't respond to anything the trainers were trying to teach her.

Finally, the teacher pulled Melvin aside and asked him to turn Angelyne's attention away from her. While the puppy sat quietly, the teacher dropped a stack of phone books on the floor behind her.

Nothing. Although Melvin said she flinched, it was just a small flinch, probably from the breeze of the books when they hit the floor. Her ears stayed floppy. She didn't move; the noise did nothing to startle her.

A subsequent visit to the veterinarian confirmed it.

Angelyne is deaf.

"The only thing I could think of was, 'How in the heck am I going to train a deaf dog?'" Melvin said.

But instead of abandoning his new friend, Melvin began researching ways to train deaf dogs.

"I bought all that stuff, and I invested time in all that, but nothing made any sense because when it comes right down to it, when you train a dog, it's all about bonding and rewarding when they do something you want them to do," he said.

Melvin started with basic American Sign Language signs, but Angelyne didn't get it, so he came up with his own signals.

"Once a few things started to click, I started rewarding her," he said.

A closed fist instructs Angelyne to focus. Thumbs down and she sits. Thumbs up means "good dog." Two fingers to his lips signals Angelyne that Melvin wants a kiss. A jumping jack motion with his hands makes her come.

More than 40 hand signals and other nonverbal movements now have Angelyne and Melvin talk-



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**ERIC MELVIN GIVES** a command to Angelyne at the main park in Windsor. Melvin takes Angelyne to schools and events to demonstrate her special skills.

ing the same language.

"She is very treated-rewarded motivated," Melvin said. "It took a lot of time. In the beginning it was three hours a day, and we still train about an hour a day."

Angelyne's motivation has rubbed off on Melvin, too.

Once the pair felt comfortable with the signs, Melvin entered Angelyne in Paws on the Promenade at the Promenade Shops at Centerra. It was just supposed to be a fun event to see what she could do, but it snowballed into much more.

"I felt pretty confident that she had all the basics down with the hand signals, and we had a few tricks we were working on," Melvin said. "There were probably maybe 10 or 12 people with their animals, and it was all based on crowd response. When it was all done, the crowd just went crazy. Then afterward, when we told people she was deaf, they were like, 'What?'"

From there, people started asking Melvin to speak at various motivational events. In the past two years, Melvin and

"Angelyne the Amazing Deaf Cattle Dog" have visited dozens of programs across Colorado — 38 this year alone.

Melvin has learned how to use his own experiences with Angelyne to help others overcome adversity.

"I've tailored the presentation and speech to char-

acter-development programs — compassion, patience, focus, caring and giving of one's self — all those things that schools try to teach kids these days.

"My purpose is to get out there. There are more places with special needs kids and adults, more places I could take her."

Although Melvin, who was laid off a month ago from his job in marketing and corporate communications, would like to continue his efforts, the ability to fund his project is becoming too much for him to financially handle on his own.

He would like to start a foundation one day connecting special needs children and adults to special needs animals.

"I think when you have something set out in front of you that you are supposed to do, you've got to go do it. And her message is to keep going. If you're not perfect, if you get with the right people, you can be perfect. If someone is willing to spend the time with you, there is nothing that can stop you."

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