



Home for the holidays
Holiday home tour gearing up for another year. Check out which homes are on display. **A 3**

DEAF DEFYING FEAT

*Cattle dog proves that handicap doesn't have to be end of life. **A2***

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MAN'S BEST FRIEND

Deaf dog teaches compassion

By Sherrie Peif

speif@mywindsornow.com

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 school children, special needs children and adults by traveling the area to teach others that nothing is impossible if those words are implemented.

Searching for a four-legged companion four years ago, Melvin found what he thought was the



JIM RYDBOM/jrydbom@mywindsornow.com

Eric Melvin of Windsor, gives hand commands to his deaf Australian cattle dog Angelyne. Melvin gives performances to area schools and special events.

perfect cattle dog — also known as a blue healer — 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, however, Angelyne didn't respond the way she should. When the dogs were sent off 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 only a small flinch and likely 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

got to work on researching various 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."

Melvin started with basic American Sign Language signs, but Angelyne did 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, and a jumping jack motion with his hands makes her come.

More than 40 different hand signals and other non-verbal movements now have Angelyne and Melvin talking the same language.

"She is very treat-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 their signs, Melvin entered Angelyne into the Paws on the Promenade event 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

CONTINUED on Page A7

Angelyne

From Page A2

told people she was deaf, they were like 'what?'"

From there, people started asking Melvin to speak at various events for inspiration into succeeding through anything. In the past two years, Melvin and "Angelyne the Amazing Deaf Cattle Dog" have visited dozens of programs all across Colorado — 38 places this year alone.

The response has been great, Melvin said.

"They love it. They're eager to ask questions. They want to play with her. They want to pet her. They want to learn the hand signals. That's how she got her name. When people see her they're always like, 'She's amazing,'"

Melvin has learned how to

use his own experiences with Angelyne to help others overcome adversity:

"I've tailored the presentation and speech to character 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 than there is of me and 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



JIM RYDBOM/jrydbom@mywindsornow.com
Angelyne waits for the hand command from Eric Melvin to snatch the dog treat from his nose.

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.

"If I can get the sponsors to help me, I want to bring those people and those ani-

mals together where they can go out and inspire each other by saying, 'Hey you know what? I'm not perfect, but if someone's willing to invest the time in me, look what I can do. I can still make you smile, even though I'm not perfect.'

"She is just a dog. But we have a mission. I think when you have

something set out in front of you that you are supposed to do, you've got to do it. And her message is to keep going. If your 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."

For more on Angelyne

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

To view video of Angelyne at work, log onto www.mywindsornow.com



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