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Wed, Mar 10, 2010 HLAGR presents: Paws with a Cause
Presenters: Shari Tolan and April Venner
www.hearinglossgrandrapids.org

Mike Wiersma: Good evening everyone. Welcome to the HLAGR chapter's bi-monthly event. We are having some events coming monthly because we are making up for the ones we canceled. I am Mike Wiersma, the chapter president. If you have any questions after this, feel free to come up and talk to any one of us on the Board.

We have Paws with a Cause with us tonight but before that we want to go over a few things with you. Vic Krause received a letter from the Frederik Meijer Gardens. I want to read that to you. (*reading: Dear Vic: you are an inspiration to us in facilitating the installation of hearing loops in our new rooms. In appreciation of you, we invite you and all who are hearing impaired to the lecture that is coming up. The lecture is free and will feature both loop technology and the C-Print technology.*) With that, I have some cards here for everyone; if you are able to attend the event, it could be really nice.

I think Chris Jacques has some announcements for you.

Chris Jacques: I just wanted to let you know that we have an event that is scheduled at the Capitol in Lansing in May... May 12. I wanted to alert all of you to that; it's the Day at the State Capitol. We have about 100-150 people who come to the Capitol annually with us to show support for a number of initiatives that we as an organization are advocating for and that people with hearing loss are involved in. Last year we had over 30 legislators show up; we were even able to individually meet with our district legislators.

For those who want to learn some of the secrets to get an audience with a legislator, we will give you hints and cheat sheets on the top six initiatives that we would like to point out. Let them know that we are interested in supporting that. We will have more details next month. In addition, next month we will have an event here where we will show you how to set up a loop system at home.

Mike Wiersma: We will give everyone a couple minutes to get in and settle down. We have quite a few more here and we are glad you were able to come. I will give them just a minute and then have at it. Why don't we get started? Tonight we have Paws with a Cause with Shari Tolan and April Venner. They are going to talk to us about Paws with a Cause, and they brought some of the dogs in.

If you have any questions, I am sure they will have a question and answer time after the presentation. I will turn it over to Shari Tolan.

Shari Tolan: Good evening. Thank you for having us here. I am Shari Tolan and my partner is April Venner. I have been with Paws with a Cause for 5 years and April has been with Paws for 3 years. We came to tell you about Paws with a Cause. It's been in existence for 31 years. We are a national organization and we train seizure response dogs, hearing dogs, service dogs and recently started a program to provide dogs for autistic children. We were started as a hearing loss dog system. It was initially Ears for the Deaf and all we did was hearing dogs. The Jansens right here from Michigan were the first couple who had a dog trained by us and our own Mike Sapp trained their dog.

From there we grew and got a new building. Now we have three buildings and 200-300 foster puppies being raised for us. We place 75-105 dogs per year. This is across the United States. It's pretty big now; we grew a lot in 31 years.

Guest: how many dogs locally?

Shari Tolan: about 50% of the dogs we place are here in Michigan.

We will tell a bit about how our program works and how you apply. We accept dogs from the breeding program, from rescue groups, and more. The dog has to be a year or older to be accepted. We do some

checks on the dogs first to make sure they are healthy and able to be trained. If the dog is donated or comes from the breeding program, they come to the program at about 8 weeks old. They live in a home environment for 12 months and then come to us for training. We are in Wayland off the 100th street exit.

Once the dogs go through the foster program, they come for obedience classes. They learn appropriate behavior in the home and out in the public. A lot of you want to pet them. If the dog is in training, it has to stop visiting everyone. Once the dog has finished in the home, they come in for training. That is usually when they are about 14-16 months old. If they are a hearing dog, they are generally there for 3-4 months. If they are there for another service, they are there longer.

Then they go to live with a client. Paws is different in this respect; most places require the client to come to the campus. At Paws we send the dog to the home with the client and train them there. In this way we find we have less problems with dogs not doing what they are supposed to do.

We do place dogs nationally and have trainers in 32 states right now. If you are an applicant and are interested in a service dog, it's pretty simple. You can contact our headquarters and they mail an application to you. It has a section for you and your doctor to fill out. Once the application is received and accepted we send an evaluator to your home to see what it's like to have a dog in the home. Some people are surprised by what that means. You are going to be living with a *dog*.

From there we will get all the information to the training staff and they look for a dog that is appropriate for you and your environment. Sometimes it takes us a while to do that; we want to make sure it's good for your home and personality. My dog is crawling around the front.

Once we match a dog to you, you get to meet the dog. Once it's finished with training you take the dog with you. At that time, you take the dog home and the trainer comes to your home to make sure the dog is doing what it is supposed to do and the dog is getting appropriate care.

I know Nancy had some very good questions before. Jump in if you want to ask us anything.

Guest: Is there a charge for the dogs?

Shari Tolan: No, we are nonprofit but we do accept donations toward a dog for you. We do have an estimate of what it takes to train a dog: that is \$10,000-15,000. Once that has been met in the client's name we place a dog with you. Anything else? Do you have any questions so far? I know you are looking forward to seeing the dog do what it does.

Guest: what about age of applicants?

Shari Tolan: 16 years old is the youngest we accept. For service dogs, it's 18 and up.

Let me tell you about the hearing dogs. They are in training for 3-4 months in our facility. The dogs do the same actions over and over. We train them for safety sounds, like the carbon dioxide alarm, smoke alarm and intruder sounds. We also do social sounds like telephones and doorbells. Most dogs go home knowing telephone, alarm clock, smoke alarm and intruder sounds. Some people request a special recognition sound like a baby's cry or a teapot whistle; out in public we teach them to respond to a name call as well. If a friend calls your name, we can teach a dog to respond to that.

Let me show you what a sound sequence looks like. You will see a very animated dog when this happens. The dog runs to the sound and then returns to the handler. The dog has to make paw contact. The dog takes you to the sound and then you can respond. We also teach the dogs to nudge you with their noses. We typically use Labs and Golden Retrievers, but we also use smaller dogs. We accept shelter dogs as well; we have a number of rescue dogs. The smaller dogs don't weigh as much so we teach them to jump up.

Cha-Cha is a 16 month old Yellow Lab who is close to being done with training. Fritz is with me and is not as far along with his training. The black box over there is to train the dog to the sound of the smoke alarm. In training we can set it off with a remote. It's going to go off and you can see Cha-Cha go to it. We teach her to go to it and then go back to April and nudge her. Are you ready, April? Is Cha-Cha

ready? All right. Good job! We will also set off a timer at this side of the room so you can see her do that one too. She is excited! Fritz just learned that sounds mean food so he is very excited. Good girl!

Sanford Freed: you are exciting all the dogs in the room! They are all doing the same as the training dogs.

Shari Tolan: you can see that we have a couple of our placed dogs and their owners with us tonight. They are good sources for your questions. One of the other things that we like to point out about our hearing dogs is that they are more energetic than our service dogs.

Guest: what if you need both?

Shari Tolan: we do both. We have to find just the right dog for that. Blindness is the one disability that we don't train our dogs to service. Service dogs are for people with MS or CP; there is a list of 30 different disabilities that I can't think of right now. You are not helping me, April. It's more for someone who is in a wheelchair. The service dogs that lead the blind are for people who only need them for that.

Guest: Mystic is a service dog but she also does hearing things for me. I have hearing aids in both ears. If I am in bed, I don't hear the doorbell or the alarm clock. The house alarm went off two weeks ago and that did not wake me up. Mystic responds to those sounds and paws me quite a bit. By doing so she gets her breakfast. She saved my life two weeks ago! I was almost in diabetic coma and she set off.....

Shari Tolan: she set off the emergency call button and the paramedics were able to come and save him.

Guest: that is why I got a medal for her. She saved my life!

Shari Tolan: do you have any other questions for us?

Guest: how many years does a service dog work with a client?

Shari Tolan: it depends on the medical condition of the dog. Most of them give 9-10 years of service. Some of the smaller dogs can work longer. Occasionally we have to replace them sooner, if one of the dogs dies.

Guest: after you get a new dog, do you need to go through the process of raising the money again in order to get the next dog?

Shari Tolan: yes, we still have to raise funds for the dog but it generally takes a much shorter time. It generally takes only six months to replace a dog but 18 months to three years to get the first dog. We cannot accept applications until the person is age appropriate.

Guest: do you have to train them to get along with other animals?

Shari Tolan: some do. We find out what other animals are in your house and that tells us what kind of dog to place with you. If you have cats, dogs, fish, turtles, etc., we can still place a dog. It depends on the dog or other animals.

Guest: some apartments and condos have rules against dogs. Is this an exception?

Shari Tolan: this does not apply to service dogs under ADA law. You are allowed service dogs there. Are they allowed in public? Yes, they can go anywhere that the general public is allowed to go. Sometimes you run into situations like in a church—I have not had that—but sometimes schools also have an issue. The reason that this is an issue is not that the dog is not allowed there, but it depends on the child's disability and the reason the dog has to be there. If the child does not have an express need to get through the day with the dog, they don't allow them.

Guest: what about allergies?

Shari Tolan: that is not considered "limiting" in the public sector. Your service dog is still allowed in public with you.

Guest: what about air travel or public transportation?

Shari Tolan: they are not allowed to charge an additional fee for a service dog. If you have the certification, they are not allowed to charge for the dog.

Guest: they also have to allow the dog in the cabin with you, not just the cargo hold. I could not imagine that this dog was going to save my life. She opens doors for me and picks up things for me

when I drop them. She brings me the phone and makes sure I get up when the alarm clock goes off. I like to make jokes that she knows if she does not want to listen to me, she can open the front door by herself and go outside.

If I won the lottery right now, I would give a huge chunk of money to these people. She has been with me only six months but she is so sweet, lovable, helpful and adorable. I had to wait 21 months and when I got Mystic last August it has been just a wonderful six months. She loves to tease me and play with me. Right now she knows there is a biscuit in my bag for her and she wants it.

Shari Tolan: we do have poodles that we can train if you are allergic. That was a good question.

Guest: for fundraising, is it the responsibility of the person who wants the dog to raise the funds?

Shari Tolan: I'm not involved with that end of it but my understanding is that it's not the client's responsibility to do the fundraising. Through each county we are associated with another organization that provides some funding for the dogs and we also accept donations. It's not the responsibility of the client but we like when they help with that.

Guest: how many employees do you have?

Shari Tolan: at our headquarters I think there are 40-45. We have a regional office in Detroit, Chicago and Florida too. I think there are one or two employees at each of those. Our 32 trainers are contract employees. I think we have 57 field representatives in other states; our foster homes are all volunteers. Any other questions?

Guest: what is the biggest challenge that Paws with a Cause is facing now?

Shari Tolan: I would say that there are a couple of challenges. The number one challenge is fundraising because the economy in Michigan has taken a down turn. We have decreased our dogs to 75-80 dogs each year, which is about half of what we normally do. The other big challenge is getting dogs into the program. Currently we have only 175 dogs; normally we have up to 500. We have had to downsize as well; less people are breeding because they cannot afford it right now.

Guest: what is your title and how long have you been with the organization?

Shari Tolan: I am a staff trainer and have been with Paws with a Cause since 2005. I went through the apprentice trainer program and I taught retrieve and seizure response. April is a certified trainer as well.

Guest: what is the most popular breed of dog that you use?

Shari Tolan: Labs and Goldens are the majority. We also cross Labs and Goldens; that is the most successful breed for us. We do have some of the rescue dogs that we don't know what they are.

Guest: are they smaller?

Shari Tolan: if it's easier for you to have a smaller dog, we look for that. If you are small or have stability issues you don't want a big dog that will knock you down.

Guest: so the person has some input into the kind of dog they get?

Shari Tolan: we don't guarantee a specific gender or breed but we want the dog that most closely matches you and your needs. We can get a specific breed or gender but it adds to your wait time.

Thank you very much. We appreciate you having us here and we want to thank the Board for having us. We are taking a sign language class right now, April and I, so if you would be willing to talk with us in sign language we would love that.

Mike Wiersma: thank you very much for coming out tonight. We appreciate the dogs that came tonight too. I know you said that we are not supposed to pet them when they are working but can we pet them here?

Shari Tolan: yes, you can but there are a couple of rules. The dogs have to sit or lay down when you pet them. If they get up, they have to sit or lay down again before you pet them again. The purpose for that is that they need to be in control when someone approaches them.

Guest: if they fail, can we take them home with us?

Shari Tolan: *[laughing]* no.

Guest: I had to get the camera from home a few minutes ago and I told my husband that I was in love. He asked with whom and he was happy it was just a dog.

Mike Wiersma: I think 90% of you came in after the announcements we made at the start of the program. We had an announcement that thanked Vic Krause for the loop system at the Frederik Meijer Gardens and they invited everyone to a gardening event at the Gardens. I don't know if we still have more of those brochures. Everyone is welcome to come to the event.

One last thing, next month we will have a class here on how to install your own loop at home. Bring your questions and we will walk through that process. There is another exciting thing that is coming up that Sanford Freed wants to talk about.

Sanford Freed: how many of you have been to support groups for the hearing? Just a few. We are in our sixth year of running the chapter. One of the needs that we think that we are missing is running a sort of support group for those that wear hearing aids or for those whose child or other loved one is wearing hearing aids. One thing I want to ask is this: if you had some needs that you have as a hard of hearing person or as someone who is living with someone who is hard of hearing, what comes to mind that we can help with? If you are not sure, that is okay.

We are talking about the possibility of using a portion of the programs to do a kind of support group setting where people can just talk. You can ask questions like "is my hearing loss a natural process of aging or something I need to be concerned about?"

Guest: some of the other chapters in the state have a rap session like this once every 2-3 months.

Sanford Freed: that is another option—to do it as a dedicated program. We are not sure what works but maybe you can help us with that. Maybe you have some questions that need to be addressed and this could be a good setting for you. I am not asking you to stand up right now, but talk to any of us around and we can figure out the best way to do this.

Let me do this. How many have been here before? Did you get a postcard or e-mail? Wonderful postcards, aren't they? Juli Wiseman does that. How many of you heard about it through the website? How many got an e-mail and that is how you heard about us? So mainly it was postcards. How many heard about this some other way? Saw a notice in a newspaper or magazine?

Guest: originally or tonight?

Sanford Freed: we are just trying to figure out what is working. It sounds like the postcards are the main thing.

Nancy Cluley: how many of you have e-mail addresses?

Juli Wiseman: if you are not on the e-mail list, see Hannah and we can sign you up.

Sanford Freed: if you want to know about the programs through e-mail, see Hannah in the white sweater.

Juli Wiseman: if you don't have your address on there already, put it on there now.

Sanford Freed: if you have any ideas for the program, let us know.

Chris Jacques: Actually what I wanted to do is put in a plug for next month. If you have hearing aids that receive the signal like what we have here, you will be very interested in learning how to loop your own home so you can watch television and get the signal and sound sent right to your hearing aid. These are very affordable—about \$200—and it makes a huge difference in your life.

I now have two loop systems in my home and it's great. I can watch television without blaring it so loudly that my wife goes crazy. I can walk into several different rooms and still hear the television in the first room. I can also have my wife hooked up so she can be heard anywhere in the house. I chose not to do that. *[laughing]*

But everyone with hearing aids can use this information. It will be a very instructive session and I recommend that you show up and bring friends. The date for that is April 21. It's on our website.

Nancy Cluley: I want to put a plug in for myself. I am here because my daughter Hannah has a hearing impairment. I got Mike to come to our house and put a loop in our television room. Hannah is now glued to the television. I don't even have to have the sound on now. She can hear it through the loop and I don't have to listen to American Idol for that night. It's great. It's a plug.

Mike Wiersma: We put out a public service announcement recently. How many saw the commercial on TV13? We have the stars of that commercial right here. We have the cheerleader and the back head of that lady. We had a lot of fun building that. It was a chance that we had with TV13 to let people know about our group and see what is going on. Paws with a Cause was a lot of fun tonight and we want to do more of this.

Juli Wiseman: it's also on our website: www.hearinglossgrandrapids.org

Mike Wiersma: if you want to become a member of our Facebook page, we are also there. Even my 60 year old parents are on Facebook! Nothing is more weird than getting a note on your Facebook page that your mom wants to chat. We have tried to invite as many people as possible. Juli was the one who instigated this and she promised us a million people by the end of the year.

Another big thing that is going on is that the Hearing Loss Association of Michigan and the national organization have teamed up with the American Audiology Association. Are you familiar with Dr. Myers? He is a hearing impaired psychologist and author who has been a strong proponent of hearing loops. This is a big thing. There are lots of exciting things coming up. There were newspaper articles and magazine articles that have come out about hearing loss. The Wall Street Journal has looked at this as well. People Magazine has also had a featured article.

Guest: Spectrum Health also ran a hearing loop program at one of their locations on 68th street.

Mike Wiersma: West Michigan has really set the stage for this. There are hearing loops everywhere—the DeVos Center has a loop and so does the airport, which was the first in the nation. The country is watching us now and it's something we should be very proud of. It's picking up traction and it's not too late to be part of. You should be very proud of this. It's a neat thing we have done here.

Guest: I get e-mails from Janice Schacter as well; she was the one featured in People magazine.

Mike Wiersma: it says something on there that you have to be under 16 to go to that website. Another thing is the Yahoo groups. There is a loops and T-coils section. There is also the Better Hearing news. There are lots of things happening. It's something we are very proud of.

Any other questions? Everyone get your treats; it's time to pet the dogs. Thank you for coming and we hope to see you next month as well. It's going to be a great time. Bring a friend!