

“Nitro is proof *nothing* has to hold you back!”

Sometimes, life deals us unexpected blows. But though he was born deaf, Nitro *always* finds a reason to be happy—and his positive spirit inspired his human mom to help hundreds of other pups just like him!

Shivering as a harsh wind whipped through the trees, a small white puppy hobbled along the bank of an icy river.

His ribs protruding, he scanned the ground hoping to find even just a small scrap of food. *Please let there be something to eat over here!* he wished.

Unable to hear anything around him—not the birds chirping or cars whizzing by—he couldn’t help but let out a frightened plea: *Will someone help me?*

Full of love

I’ll stop by the shelter this afternoon,” Christina Lee promised her friend Rebecca before hanging up the phone. The Salem, Virginia, photographer regularly snapped pictures of pets up for adoption to post online.

Already a “mom” to three dogs, Christina’s heart broke for all the animals she knew needed a loving home.

“A good Samaritan found a boxer puppy by the river, and seeing what bad shape he was in, brought him here,” Rebecca told Christina when she arrived. “He’s completely deaf. I was hoping you’d adopt him...”

Christina’s mind whirled. *Me?* she thought.

The two-month-old puppy—white with a black and tan ring around one eye—

had likely been abandoned by a breeder when it was discovered he was deaf.

“You have a big heart and all that space,” Rebecca said. “He’d be safe with you.”

It was true: Living on a small farm surrounded by a high fence, Christina wouldn’t have to worry about him dashing into the road because he couldn’t hear traffic. But she’d never had a pup who was deaf.

How could someone dump him in the woods just because he can’t hear? she frowned. So after returning home, she showed her husband, Christopher, a picture of the abandoned dog, his big eyes—one brown, one blue—shining with hope.



“Let’s adopt him!” Chris agreed.

That night, the couple stayed up researching all they could on deaf dogs. But there wasn’t much information to be found.

Watching the same videos

over and over, they became determined to learn how to teach their new buddy Nitro commands using American Sign Language.

And Christina breathed a sigh of relief when Nitro seemed to fit right in with her other pups. Within days, he was bringing toys to Christina’s other dogs, as if to say, “Wanna play?”

Nitro had even become the family “clock.” At 5 p.m. on the dot, he’d march into Christina’s home office, nuzzling her for dinner!

Still, sweet and smart as he was, the thought of training Nitro felt overwhelming. What if he somehow runs off? Christina worried. He can’t hear me calling him!

Through her reading, Christina learned that older methods of training deaf dogs, like using flashlights or laser pointers, weren’t very effective: The dogs spent more time chasing the light beam than focusing on commands.

So she began practicing sign language with Nitro. And soon, he’d mastered over 60 commands!

After training, Christina would bring him to a dog park to burn off some energy. Racing around the grass, his tail wagging and tongue hanging out, Nitro bounded over to every dog who arrived, trying to coax him into a game of chase.



You are such a love! Christina would beam when, back home, Nitro snuggled up to her. She’d even started calling Nitro her “Velcro dog,” because he was never more than a few steps away.

Happy tails

Sadly, though, Christina sknew too many animals were put down at shelters across the country because they had a disability, making them “unadoptable.”

Christina couldn’t bear thinking that could have been Nitro’s fate. So she founded DeafDogsRock.com, a nonprofit dedicated to finding homes for hearing-impaired dogs.

She filled her website with tips and video tutorials she made. And every day, Christina answered e-mails from nervous dog lovers who’d learned their puppy was deaf or who were considering adopting a deaf dog.

Soon, shelters were calling Christina when they found a deaf dog, to see if she could help. And as she posted a photo of each pup on her site, the adoption requests came pouring in!

Dogs like Blitz, a pit bull terrier just one day away from being put down, found a loving home.

Blitz’s new owner, Michelle, began training her right away with sign language commands like thumbs-up for “Good girl!”

“She’s smart, goofy and very attentive!” Michelle says. “She loves dogs—and sometimes I even catch her snuggling up with the cat!”

Another dog, found abandoned, was rescued from a crowded shelter. Slowly, his new mom and dad taught him sign language.

“Defcon is the happiest creature I’ve ever known,” his mom says. “Our hearts burst with love for him!”

Today, more than 600 deaf dogs have families thanks to Deaf Dogs Rock. And because of her experience with Nitro, Christina even adopted another deaf boxer she named Bud!

“It’s amazing to see so many dogs find the forever homes they truly deserve,” Christina smiles. “Nitro is proof that *nothing* has to hold you back from living life to the fullest!”

—Rachel Misenko

Christina’s tips for taking perfect pet photos!

Help a shelter animal get adopted—or take a gorgeous portrait of your own pet—by...

✔ Sitting! “The most important thing is to get eye-level with your pet,” Christina says. “I like to sit on the floor with my dogs rather than take photos standing above them. Animals are more attentive when you’re on their level!”

✔ Using a toy! “I use a Shutter Hugger,” Christina says. “It’s a stuffed toy that fits around your camera lens, and cats and dogs can’t help but stare at it!” Or try taping a small toy or treat to your camera to draw their attention.

✔ Playing first! Have your kitty chase her favorite toy or play fetch with your pup. Once she’s just starting to feel tuckered out, start taking photos. She’ll be more relaxed and likely to hold that adorable pose even longer!



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