Things Not To Say to a Guide Dog Owner

Monday 13 May, 2019

Quiet please…guide dogs at work!

I love being out in the social scene. It's even better when Zodiac, my assistance dog, is panting by my side – usually it's me doing most of the panting trying to keep up. I also enjoy chatting to people, even though I do get into the occasional scrape here and there, often barging into things I didn't know were there.

The bigger problem, though, is that when you come as a sort of two-for-one package with your guide dog, strangers often say things that leave you scratching your head for a suitable response. Below are just a few of the oddest questions I've been asked and some of the awkward situations in which I've found myself, together with responses I've given, or wish I'd given, at the time.

Barking up the wrong tree

'Those blind dogs are amazing,' I've often been informed.
Indeed, Zodiac would be amazing if she could guide me around without the use of her eyes, sniffing and snuffling along, navigating by paw. But I am the one who is blind and I am well aware how amazing she is.

'Does she take the washing out of the machine for you too? They are confusing Zodiac with a disability assistance dog but I am fond of replying:
'Yes, she does, then she spin-dries and irons it, though sometimes she messes up the front crease on my trousers a bit.'

Now, this is a good one: '*Does your dog know which bus to catch?'* Before you think I'm pulling your leg, several people have asked me this.
'Oh, she reads the numbers on the front,' I say and try my best to look serious, 'but she is a bit of a snob and prefers to hail a black cab.'

Then comes the one that knocks me sideways: *'If you say 'pub' does she take you for a pint?'*
I hold myself straight, looking proud. 'Her tastes,' I say with a perfectly straight face, 'are a little more refined than most dogs, she prefers to go for cocktails.' At least it gets most people chuckling.

But it's not all fun. When you are blind, some people feel they have a right to challenge your disability.*'That's not a guide dog, it's black!'* I've been lectured. 'Oh damn,' I've wanted to ask, 'how the heck am I going to get home then?

Now, this is the really baffling one. *'You don't look blind,'* To be honest, I've never quite known how to answer that one.

Don't chew the map

Most people fall into the 'polite but misguided' category. When I ask for directions, for example, they will bend down to Zodiac to give them. I mean, she is a clever canine, but when you tell her to take the first on the left, then right, then second left…' I know, you're probably tickled pink by now.

'Ah bless!' I'm often told, often followed by, 'I'm praying for you.' We're a fairly mean couple of characters, as it happens.

'Do you get refused entry much because of the dog?' is another clanger.
'No, that's illegal; no one's doing me a favour by letting me into their premises, they're just keeping themselves out of prison.'

'How do you manage?' is another. Well, just watch me go!

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Camera, lights, action

Then there are the secret strokers. You know who you are. All you animal lovers out there who just can't resist a little ruffle of the fur. And if I wasn't blind and didn't know better, I'd probably be one of you. When we're chilling out – like in the pub – feel free to ask, but please don't just dive in and take her attention, she's at work.

And if you say, 'I know I shouldn't, but can I give her a treat?' Err…you've just answered your own question. What all this boils down to is me wanting to be seen as a person, not a disability – and let's face it, I'm incredibly good-looking, full of charm, with a cracking sense of humour!

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T. 07472305268
E. daniel@visualisetrainingandconsultanc...
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