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Meet a pit bull that's trained to assist

By DAVE FORSTER, The Virginian-Pilot

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Jeff Hayman's pit bull Bob Marley is being certified as a hearing dog, a move not endorsed by some canine organizations. joy lewis | the virginian-pilot

Virginia Beach

Before Jeff Hayman sleeps, he must remove both of his hearing aides so they can be cleaned.

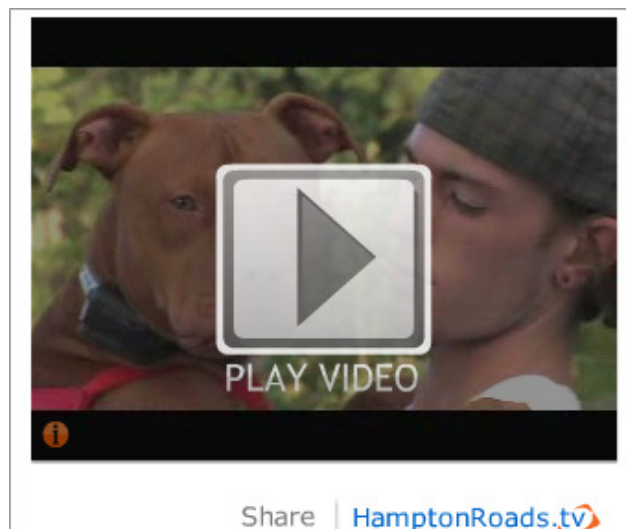
This renders the 22-year-old completely deaf. Hayman's phone, doorbell or worse - a smoke alarm - could sound, and he wouldn't hear it.

But he would feel it, thanks to Bob Marley, one of the most unusual hearing dogs in the country and, to some, a controversial one.

Marley is a pit bull. Like any good hearing dog, he knows to wake his owner by nudging or jumping on him when he hears certain sounds. On Thursday, Hayman completed the last session in a 13-week course at Tidewater K-9 Academy to turn his muscular, 54-pound companion into a certified hearing dog.

This worries some people, but not those who know Marley.

"He's a sweetheart," said Noel Lahr, the receptionist at Midway Veterinary Clinic who petted a tail-wagging Marley during a visit last week.



Video: Meet the man and his dog.

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"We wouldn't mind him coming here for day care, just so we could play with him," Lahr said.

Marley's appearance in the vet's office drew mixed reviews from the other pets. A beagle cowered under a bench, while a small, furry black Shih Tzu happily went nose to nose with the pit bull.

As he waited, Hayman told Lahr how an animal control officer had recently asked him whether he used his dog for fighting.

"I'm like, 'What,' " Hayman said.

He said that in the past few months, about 25 or 30 people have asked him whether Marley used to belong to Michael Vick, the NFL quarterback from Newport News charged with running a dogfighting operation in Surry County.

It doesn't help that the white fur on Marley's chest marks an uncanny resemblance to the number seven - Vick's jersey number.

Hayman, a Vick fan for years, said he deplores dogfighting. But he loves pit bulls, and he wants to show people that they can make great pets or hearing dogs. He bought Marley as a puppy last August.

"I want to spread it to the people," he said.

Not everyone is convinced, however. Hayman's story has alarmed several people who deal with assistance dogs.

Corey Hudson is chief executive officer of Canine Companions For Independence, a California-based non profit group with seven locations. His organization trains only golden and Labrador retrievers, breeds Hudson says are so welcoming to strangers that they almost act as ambassadors for people with disabilities.

Hudson worried about the public reception Hayman might receive because of the aggressive reputation of pit bulls.

"Using a pit bull as a hearing dog is highly inadvisable in our opinion," Hudson said. "I can't say it vehemently enough - I'm just amazed."

Robin Dickson, president of Oregon-based Dogs for the Deaf, said that even though a pit bull might make an exceptional hearing dog, she worried about public perception.

"You get on a plane with one of those dogs, and everyone will be tempted to get off the plane," she said.

Dickson and Hudson, each members of Assistance Dogs International Inc., a coalition of organizations that train assistance dogs, are concerned about others following Hayman's lead and not properly training their dog. They said they had never heard of a pit bull being used as a hearing dog, although there was at least one used several years ago in Alaska.

Hayman said he has already changed some attitudes.

He recalled the first time he took Marley to Croatan in Virginia Beach. He's had a difficult time finding an apartment willing to rent to a pit bull owner, and he half-expected to be told to leave the beach.

But instead of keeping their distance, people approached him, he said. One was a 4-year-old boy. "Mommy, big doggy," the child said.

"Would you like to pet him?" Hayman asked.

Hayman saw the mother look uneasy, so he told Marley to sit. Before long, Hayman had the mother amazed.

Her son was pouring sand on a pit bull and petting its belly.

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