

SENSITISE PUBLIC ABOUT DIFFERENT DISABILITIES

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BLOEMFONTEIN – For over 25 years of her life, Yolanda Greyling was used to waking up to the sound of chirping birds and barking dogs on her parents farm in Bethlehem in the northern Free State. But all this changed when a brain tumour removal left her partially deaf, a disability she said most people do not understand.

“I am hard-of hearing which makes me partially deaf; and with my hearing aid I can hear when speaking face to face with people and over the phone but I cannot hear the smallest things like my cellphone ringing, people calling my name or when someone is knocking at the door,” she said.

Because she did not want to depend on people to do basic things, she started her internet search for the best option suited to her as a hard-of-hearing person.

“There is this new technology which can indicate a ringing phone with a flickering light, but it costs R150 000 which is very expensive because I would need to get two for my home and at work,” she said.

The most inexpensive and reliable option she had was a service dog, often confused with guide dogs used by blind people.

“After a lengthy search on the internet, I found out about an organisation in the United States which breeds German-Sherperd dog’s and trains them for hard-of-hearing people. The South African Guide Dog Association does not invest much into this service, but I found a German-Sherperd dog breeder in Frankfort who said they could help me.

“When my phone is ringing and I do not see it vibrate, the dog brings it to me. When someone behind me is calling my name, the dog stops in front of me to alert me to that person or pull towards their direction,” Greyling, 33, explained.

While she is coping with her disability and tries to lead a normal life, the biggest challenge has been people who are discriminatory towards her and see the dog as a threat than as her aid. On numerous occasions, Greyling was refused entry into retail shops because of her dog, which was described by one of the store managers as “fierce looking”.

“The staff at Foschini refused me entry even though I explained to them that I needed the dog. Some people said that I am not blind so I do not need a guide dog,” she explained. “People don’t believe me when I tell them about my disability. There is this idea that one needs to be literally handicapped or even unappealing to be disabled, but that is not the case,” Greyling said. However, a store manager at Foschini said they did not refuse Greyling entry. “We told her she could enter the store, but the dog had to stay outside. [The staff] being 99 percent black people, they were frantic because the dog is huge. I even told her to leave the dog outside and I would assist her in the shop,” the manager who prefers anonymity said.

“I think she was offended. And one could not see that there’s a disability. It is still a difficult situation because it causes chaos,” she added.

Greyling used to be bothered by the treatment she and her dog, Ivar, received but has come to brush it aside.

“At the beginning I got angry at people, but that did not help. My husband sometimes does not want to move around with me because he gets angry at the taunts, but I have gotten used to it,” she said. Before she had the dog which is trained by a live-in dog trainer just over a year ago, she was dependent on her mother and husband for a lot of things.

“This is why I have a service dog which helps me get by. My family was always supportive but I could not expect them to be there all the time. But unfortunately, people do not understand why I have the dog around,” the bubbly woman said. Greyling, on the other hand, said there are two kinds of people and attitudes relating to her dog.

“There are those who do not realise that it is working and pet it a lot, which diverts its attention from me. Then there are those who shout at the dog when they see it because they think it is harmful. So they are at two opposite ends – I don’t know which group is worse,” Greyling said with a chuckle. Despite all the challenges and curious-but-sometimes scared stares from the public, Greyling’s life is as normal as the next person’s.

“I have started going out and being around people. The company I work at is also supporting – except when they see the dog. I started before the operation and they are still as accommodating. “All I want is if someone could just educate people that it is not only the blind people who need dogs. There are other disabilities out there which need their services,” Greyling emphasised.

Government has been chastised for not doing enough to ensure inclusion of disabled people in various department projects or institutions, with the MEC for Social Development in Free State Sisi Ntombela saying at a recent non-governmental organisation dialogue admitting that “that we are not doing enough for the disabled people”.

Free State provincial coordinator of Disabled People’s of South Africa (DPSA) Mokati Moledi, said public awareness was still needed to educate people on challenges facing the disabled and how they can best accommodate the disabled.

“South Africa signed the United Convention on the rights of Disabled People, but still the inclusion of Disabled People is very slow. Again it also goes back to the community at large, the attitude of members of the community is also another challenge which leads to people with disability been sidelined,” Moledi said in an interview with Public Eye recently.

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