

Commission en direct

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Canine colleagues

Guide dogs in training

by Christian Bondeson-Eggert, EP

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If you're ever in the Charlemagne building and you see a dog running around the offices, don't worry – it's Pika, and her presence has been officially approved.

Julie Timon (DG TRADE) is in charge of Pika, a beautiful Golden Labrador who is in training for a year to become a guide dog for the visually impaired.

Growing up abroad and moving around a lot, Julie always longed to have a dog. When she finally settled in Brussels in 2015, she heard about the Belgian Fondation I see and their scheme for dog hosting: volunteers take care of the dog's basic training for about a year before formal training as a guide dog begins.

Julie immediately felt that this was something worth trying out.

Real-life lessons

"I went to an information meeting for hosting families where everything was explained," Julie says. "The organisation was positive, and after some weeks of checking if I would be suitable as a host, I was accepted. It took some more weeks before I was informed that Pika and her sister Pistache were ready to meet their new families. Pika came with me, and Pistache is now with a colleague in DGT (see box)."

The basic training that Pika is following consists of getting used to all kinds of real-life situations, including being in an office. She needs to learn to be obedient - and to socialise.

"I have taken her to supermarkets, conferences, buses, even to bars. I always ask if it is OK if Pika comes along, and in most cases it works well. What is so tempting for her is the food she sees everywhere – it's a real challenge for her!"

During our interview, Pika is very curious and tries to snatch my notebook, but Julie, using French as a command language, quickly tells her to settle down.



► Pistache (right) and her sister Pika wait politely for a dog biscuit

Pistache

Pistache, Pika's sister, has also joined the Commissi

Fitting in at work

Does she ever get any negative comments about Pika?

"Most colleagues and people I meet are curious and positive. Of course, some are allergic or even scared, and I always try to read people's reactions to avoid problems and misunderstandings. I also ask if I can come with Pika. And yes, for a puppy, keeping things tidy has been a bit of an issue in the past, but I always go out with my special cleaning kit. Also the cleaning team has been

on (DGT) and is hosted by Corinne Vibet. She describes Pistache as careful before acting, a good listener and focused on her tasks. Her weak point? She's greedy – you can get her to do anything with a dog biscuit. In other words, she's easy to train! Pistache is well integrated in DGT and her fan club extends to the 10 floors of the G-12 building and beyond. Wherever she goes, she encourages contact: people talk to her, then talk to Corinne, then to each other. Pistache is a very good dog: she sleeps on her cushion while Corinne works, sits under the table at the canteen, and goes to meetings, conferences and presentations. Outside work, she leads an intense cultural life, going to exhibitions, museums, concerts and sports competitions. Everywhere she goes, she's a conversation starter. For now, Pistache has all the skills required to become a guide dog.

most understanding and helpful!"

Her Head of Unit – a true dog lover – welcomed the idea of having Pika in the office from the start. Julie also checked with colleagues from her own unit and other units in the same corridor before agreeing to the hosting. The HR Director and the Security Directorate gave their permission after some hesitation as there had been some problems with dogs in the past. Now they are fine as everything works smoothly.

How will it feel when Julie has to say goodbye to Pika? "Well, I was well aware from the start of the objectives of the basic training. Taking on Pika has meant a huge change in my lifestyle. I spend almost all day and night with her, and frankly, it can be challenging. So I think I am prepared to say goodbye when the day comes."

In a few months we will see if Pika is accepted as a guide dog. 30% of the dogs in basic training do not make it to the end of the process, either for medical or behavioural reasons.

Meanwhile, in the Charlemagne, Pika continues to put smiles on colleagues' faces. Her presence also promotes the image of the Commission as a caring institution where volunteering is encouraged. According to Julie, Pika is also the perfect icebreaker: "Lots of people in the institutions don't seem to talk to each other. When Pika enters the lift, people smile and start talking to her in their own language. She is far better known than I am. A while ago a colleague went to Ukraine on a mission. She was greeted in Kiev with "So you work in DG TRADE together with Pika!"

"She gets a lot of attention," Julie adds. "The morning routine consists of a sprint in the corridors of the 5th floor in the Charlemagne building, checking out colleagues and getting an occasional treat. People like dogs."

Would you like to become a volunteer host? Find out more at Fondation I See (see link below).

Fondation I See (<http://www.fondationisee.be/>)

Topics: TRADE, DGT,



Christian Bondeson-Eggert

Newsletter Editor, European Parliament's IT service

After more than 20 years of public service in various organisations including the European Commission, Christian Bondeson-Eggert recently joined the European Parliament's IT service, DG ITEC. As the newsletter editor, he strives to transform abstract ideas into human stories to which readers can relate.
