

Less Bark, More Focus: An Investigation into Raising Guide Dogs

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WRITER'S COMMENT: I was initially pretty anxious about this article assignment that was given to me and my fellow classmates in our 104C Journalism class because it was our last assignment and meant to be a full length feature article. And I had no ideas. But after I bounced some ideas around in my head that weren't sticking properly, my boyfriend suggested out of the blue that I consider writing something about dogs since I have a huge soft spot for them. I wasn't sure about it at first because I wasn't certain that I could write anything interesting concerning dogs for more than six pages. That's when the idea of investigating guide dogs came up as a potential topic, and that peaked my interest. I realized that this was something that people may not know very much about, myself included, and it was a wonderful and fascinating experience learning about something that is a normal way of life for those in need of a guide dog. My research and interview subjects provided me with a wealth of knowledge that I couldn't possibly have packed into this article, but I did my best to provide a satisfactory taste of what it's like to raise, train, and own a guide dog.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: After writing several shorter articles drawn from personal experience or interviews, students in my UWP 104C (Writing in the Professions: Journalism) class tackle a full-length feature article on a timely topic. Anna Cheek's love of dogs and her discovery of a local organization dedicated to the raising of guide dogs led her to some excellent sources—and to an actual guide puppy in training. Deftly integrating interviews, facts, and explanation, Anna provides a fascinating look into guide dog training and Yolo County's Eyes for Others, allowing us to appreciate more fully the considerable demands and rewards of this important work.

—Cynthia Bates, University Writing Program

Gromit, a smiling yellow labrador with too-big puppy paws, came strutting up to our table outside Starbucks—a proud dog wearing his “Guide Dogs for the Blind” vest and leash. I had been chatting with Gail Bimson, leader of the Eyes For Others: Yolo County Puppy Raiser’s club in Davis, California, when another club volunteer, Don Ballard, came to join us with Gromit. A dog lover my entire life, I had to control my desire to lavish too much attention on him; after all, he was still in training-mode, and I didn’t want to distract him too much. I had to keep reminding myself that he wasn’t a pet dog to be spoiled with tummy rubs and ear scratches, that he was training for an important job and had to remain focused. I was surprised to note that there were times during our conversation when I forgot completely that he was sitting at my feet. At six months old, he was well mannered, without even a whisper of noise reaching our ears.

Gail and Don are currently co-raising him in each of their homes until he’s about a year old and ready to be sent to the Guide Dogs for the Blind school in San Rafael. Once there, he’ll be put through eight phases of training to determine if he’s guide dog worthy. Gail frequently gets asked if raising puppies is her full-time job, and she laughs out a “no.” She works as a physical therapist at the Student Health and Wellness Center at UC Davis. Don, on the other hand, is retired—he enjoys raising puppies, woodcarving and fishing. Volunteering, however, has become almost a second job for them due to the amount of work and dedication it demands. Both volunteers have pet dogs of their own, but they recognize the difference between their pet dogs and the job these guide dog puppies are trained for. It’s not only a job but a way of life these dogs have to develop, including little Gromit, in their process of training.

How Guide Dog Training Got Started

Serving as a tool to help visually impaired individuals is one of the oldest service dog professions. Its roots go as far back as World War I to a German doctor named Gerhard Stalling, who witnessed many soldiers return home blind. He realized the potential of training dogs after he left his own pet dog briefly with a patient. Upon his return, he noticed signs of the dog keeping watch over the blind man.

So in 1916, Stalling opened the first guide dog school for the blind in Oldenburg to explore different techniques in training dogs for becoming reliable guides. But the organization had to shut down in 1926 due to a

shortage of dog quality. At this point, however, he had already broken new ground in the process of training dogs for this unique task and a separate guide dog school had been founded and was going strong in Potsdam, near Berlin. Dorothy Eustis, an American stationed in Switzerland at that time to breed and train German Shepherds for civic duty, heard of the guide dog training in Potsdam. She visited the school and, impressed with their work, wrote an article about the school in *The Saturday Evening Post* entitled “The Seeing Eye,” in 1927.

Back in the United States, a young blind man, Morris Frank, heard about Eustis’s article and wrote her a letter expressing interest in obtaining his own guide dog. Eustis decided to help and asked him to come to Switzerland to learn how to work with a guide dog named “Buddy.” After the training, Buddy came home with Frank, and he’s considered the first guide dog to have been brought back to the U.S. Frank’s story received a great deal of positive attention, leading Eustis to return to the U.S. in 1929 to start the nation’s first guide dog school, The Seeing Eye, in New Jersey.

Since then, guide dog schools have cropped up and thrived throughout the United States. One of the largest schools on the West Coast is Guide Dogs for the Blind, with locations in San Rafael, California and Boring, Oregon. These are the schools to which puppies from Yolo County’s Eyes for Others club are sent to be trained further in the field of guide work.

Eyes for Others: Yolo County Puppy Raisers club

When Don Ballard sat down with Gromit at our table, he slapped down a thick binder of tabs and paperwork between Gail and me. Don told me that anything and everything about Gromit was recorded in that binder—especially important since both he and Gail are raising him—down to the last time he relieved himself. I was surprised by this fact and Don emphasized the importance of putting him on a relieving schedule. “When Gail and I hand him off to each other, the first thing we ask is, ‘When’s the last time he pooped?’” Gail interjects with, “For a pet dog, nobody cares. But for a guide dog, it’s important they’re on these relieving schedules. We try to put them on a schedule so that they don’t relieve themselves on walks—they have to do it on command and on a leash. If he patterns it on a walk, it will become habit. Peeing on bushes is just a pattern pet dogs do; they don’t have to do that.” The purpose of this schedule is to make it easier for their blind owner to know when to let them do their business.

Besides the important aspect of training dogs to be on a relieving schedule, Gail and Don and all the other volunteers of this club basically provide preliminary training by making sure the dogs are house broken and have basic obedience and have good socialization skills. They take Gromit everywhere a blind person would go: restaurants and grocery stores as well as on different modes of transportation like buses, cars and trains. These puppies have to learn to be adaptable to different situations, which is why the process of co-raising also helps out. The puppies will have to go from their puppy raising home to the training facility in San Rafael and eventually to the blind person. So within the first two years of their life, they'll go through at least three changes in their primary owner, which means they will need to be loyal to each new master. Fortunately, this is something that labrador retrievers are pretty good at. Generally, labs are very trainable dogs, who are food motivated, love people and are very sociable—all good traits for a guide dog. German Shepherds were the signature guide dog for decades until the discovery that labs could achieve the same result in much less time.

One thing that many people wonder when they see guide dogs, myself included, is whether or not they ultimately are given the chance to act and be treated as real dogs. Are they allowed to play around and go on walks or fetch a ball? Gail was quick to say she was glad I brought up that question because it's a common misconception that they are only treated as workers on a special job and have no time to truly be a "pet" dog. She made it clear that when they're home, they're allowed to be puppies. They can't race around all the time, chew up toys or get up on furniture, but they are allowed to play with other dogs and pre-approved toys. The master has to be the one to dictate when it's time to play, not the dog, and say when playtime is over. The one activity trainers make sure to avoid is the act of retrieving because dogs can develop an obsession to it. As long as it doesn't get started, it's not something they get crazy about. What's important is that the dog gets trained a certain way by the trainers, but ultimately it's up to the blind person to decide how the dog should behave when off the harness. Gail and Don gave me an example of a dog named "Dell," who was matched with a guy living in Sacramento: "The things he lets that dog do at home, I never saw while he was with me," Gail laughs. Dell is allowed to sleep on his owner's bed, race around the house and bark—but he can turn it on and turn it off. He's all business when the harness goes on, which is a sign of a properly

trained guide dog. “The blind person can be way more relaxed than the trainer, and that’s fine,” Don told me.

The puppy raiser’s primary responsibility is producing a well-trained, obedient, sociable and willing-to-work puppy for the Guide Dogs for the Blind school. Though the volunteers don’t deal with the more extensive training that is involved at the school in San Rafael, Gail and Don did mention some vital skills the dogs eventually will learn. One of the most important skills is stopping at any sort of elevation or overhead obstacles that the person’s head might hit. From there, however, it is up to the blind person to figure out why the dog has stopped. That being said, each blind person who comes to the San Rafael school is not required to have any prior experience with handling dogs: the whole purpose is to match the person in need with a guide dog that matches his/her lifestyle. The blind person will go to the school and be taught everything he or she needs to know about that dog. While the goal is to produce a multitude of dogs prepared to do the important job of guide work, Gail and Don made it clear that dogs, like people, are unique. Some have more high-energy than others, which is why the pairing process itself is important. Don mentioned a blind hiker named Trevor Thomas, who obtained a dog that was raised in Yolo County and how he needed a dog that would match his own high energy level to provide him with the eyes he needed. This is why the matching process is equally important as the physical training of the dog—it won’t work if a blind person who lives a more mellow lifestyle receives a dog that has higher energy levels than the blind person needs, and vice versa.

The puppy raisers at Eyes for Others tweak the normal obedience training and commands used for pet dogs into something more appropriate for guide dogs. First and foremost, they never train the puppies off leash because the dog will be on the leash constantly with its matched owner. To illustrate command differences, Don explained that when a pet dog is commanded to “come,” it typically approaches and sits next to you, but when a guide dog receives the command, it will need to come and touch the knee of its owner to let him/her know it’s there. It won’t do any good if the dog knows how to come but won’t touch the blind person. While pet dogs are taught to watch their owners while on a walk to know where to go and when to stop, guide dogs need to be alert and aware of their surroundings. Another training difference is that when a guide dog’s owner stops walking, the dog is taught to remain standing

and alert, whereas a pet dog is usually trained to sit when its master comes to a stop.

When these puppies go to the San Rafael school, they learn more extensively about when to disobey commands and when not to be distracted. With this skill, known as “intelligence disobedience,” the dog is able to disobey a command if it’s dangerous to the owner, such as the command to cross a street with approaching traffic. They’re also taught to have good manners in restaurants or grocery stores—something Eyes for Others begins to address in its obedience training—and not to pay attention cats or squirrels. The school also uses methods that include treadmill workouts, clicker training, food rewards and praise, intelligence disobedience and emergency responses for the owner’s safety.

Volunteering

Two of my first questions for Gail and Don were what kinds of people are qualified to raise the puppies and what kinds of people volunteer? Gail’s response was surprising: they’ve had people anywhere from 9 to 90 years old raising these puppies for a year! “That’s pretty much how they suck people in, ‘You only have to be 9 to raise a puppy!’ and the kids are like, ‘Okay, sure!’ and they have to go suck their parents into it too.” That is pretty much how Gail got into volunteering as well. Her daughter came home from 5th grade one day to tell her mom all about a presentation her class had about puppy raising for guide dogs. Convincing her mom to help her raise dogs for the blind since she couldn’t own a dog of her own, her daughter eased her into the program, and they started going to meetings. “It’s kind of been our thing we did together. We raised six dogs together until she left for college. She grew up with her dream of a house full of dogs.” As for Don, he started volunteering after adopting a puppy that Gail had trained but that hadn’t made it as a guide dog. Gromit is his first Eyes for Others puppy, and he’s loving it. “First thing everyone asks me is, ‘Oh, that’s so great you’re doing that, but how do you give them up?’ and I say, ‘Well, it’s a mindset—he’s not mine. He’s a loaner. Someone gave him to me to raise, but that’s it.’” Don relates. While they both admit that they do develop a certain attachment to the puppies, they know they’re raising them for a different purpose than for themselves, which is something all volunteers have to face and accept.

Gail told me that she’s seen all sorts of people volunteer successfully: there have been teachers, office workers, even UC Davis students—any people with some flexibility in their daily schedule to tackle this task.

They even once had a volunteer who worked as a Uni-Trans bus driver and strapped the puppy to her seat while she worked her shift. “You either take the dog with you [on errands, around with you in your daily life], the dog stays with a sitter or a crate, or you don’t go—that’s just part of it. If you can’t do that, then you shouldn’t be volunteering,” Don says. And Gail made sure to relate to me that it is in fact a constant job. When you want to go somewhere, you have to bank on an extra ten to fifteen minutes to make sure you have everything in a backpack for the puppy: treats, leash and cleaning supplies. Along with that, everything related to training the puppy has to be consistent—you can’t vary or cave on certain rules because you’re tired. “All the work and everything you do for the puppy is far outweighed by how much fun it is,” Gail says. “You have this opportunity to participate in something that really is big, and the place where you feel that the most is when you get invited to the graduation ceremony—when you get to meet the person who’s going to have the puppy you raised.”

Gail and Don are proud of participating in something that is bigger than themselves, something that is being done for the greater good and for the benefit of people who need a guide dogs help. The most rewarding aspect of volunteering is seeing the puppies they raised behave well in stores or other public places for others to see. They’ve talked to blind people who have these dogs and are delighted to hear the difference it makes in their lives to have a companion to show them the way. Before having a guide dog, many had to use a long cane, which basically acted like a big neon sign saying, “Look at me, I’m blind.” It was a much slower way of transportation because the cane shows you every obstacle that you don’t necessarily need to know is there, whereas a guide dog will guide you around things you didn’t even know were there. Don says with a smile on his face, “Guide dogs are not just their eyes but also their companions. Blind people will tell you that before they were just kind of ignored and left alone, but the thing about a dog is that it just sucks people to them. Now it brings them out into the world.”

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