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April 2010

The Seeing Eye mission:

Preparing puppies
to become guide dogs

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Staff photo/Charles J. Olson

Courtney Ewing holds her dog, Riva, her first puppy-in-training for The Seeing Eye. Riva is being raised to be a helper for a blind person.

Dogged determination

By DEBORAH M. MARKO
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UPPER DEERFIELD — Riva and Bally nip and wrestle on Joan Maloney's living room floor, engaging in carefree puppy play.

This socialization is a critical component to prepare the pups for their future roles as Seeing Eye guide dogs, where they will enable a blind person to lead a more independent life, said Maloney, coordinator of the Cumberland County Puppy Power 4-H Club.

The pups visiting Maloney are under the care of two Cumberland Regional High School students.

Bally, a German shepherd, is the fourth Seeing Eye pup raised by Rachel Rottkamp. She's a natural, said her

friend Courtney Ewing, who dubs Rottkamp "the animal whisperer."

Ewing was inspired by Rottkamp to join the puppy-raising program. Riva, a Labrador, is her first pup.

"I was so excited to get her," Ewing said.

Club members voluntarily raise the puppies, teaching them to be around people and exposing them to a variety of public places.

The Cumberland County club has raised more than 50 puppies for The Seeing Eye, based in Morristown. Current members include Katie, Shannon, Holly, Doug and Jacob Forbes of Vineland; Rottkamp and Ewing; Blake

Maloney of Upper Deerfield; Bob Van-Hassel of Millville; and Mildred Caltabiano of Pittsgrove.

Joan Maloney got involved when her daughter Lauren, an active 4-H member, joined the organization.

"Lauren raised several puppies before she went off to college," Maloney said. After Lauren left, Maloney and her husband, Blake, stayed involved with the program.

A Seeing Eye area coordinator places the pups in approved homes, where they will spend the next year. They arrived at 7 weeks old, already named.

The German shepherds, Labradors and golden retrievers are bred specifi-

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Call (856) 451-2800 for more information on the Seeing Eye Puppy Raising Program.

cally for the program.

"The puppies are a lot of work," said Christine Higham, a Seeing Eye area coordinator based in Toms River. "It's fun and challenging at the same time."

Puppy raisers

It's a full-time responsibility for Rottkamp and Ewing, who said their

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Q&A: The Seeing Eye

Frequently asked questions about raising a Seeing Eye dog.

What is 4-H and do I have to join?

The Seeing Eye/4-H Puppy Raising Program, started in 1942, is a joint effort of The Seeing Eye Inc. and the 4-H Youth Development Program. Participants are ages 9 to 19 years, as well as adults.

When you join the puppy-raising program, you are joining 4-H. You can choose to take advantage of other benefits of the 4-H program in your area or focus only on the puppy-raising program. Families are asked to attend at least one 4-H club meeting in their county and complete an application before receiving a puppy.

I'm an adult. Can I raise a puppy, and do I have to attend the 4-H meetings?

Yes, The Seeing Eye accepts adult applications and requests that you, too, attend the 4-H puppy club meetings to help socialize the puppy. Meetings also are an opportunity for younger members to work with the puppy, to help expose it to children. The club meetings are essential to the puppy-raising process.

How old will the puppy be when I get him or her?

Between 7 and 8 weeks old.

Do I need to go to The Seeing Eye to pick up my puppy?

A representative of The Seeing Eye, called an area coordinator will call you and make arrangements to deliver the puppy to your home. At that time, the coordinator will spend about an hour and a half explaining the details of raising a puppy for The Seeing Eye.

What if the puppy needs veterinary care?

If you have a family veterinarian, you may continue to use that practice. If you are unfamiliar with a veterinarian in your area, your area coordinator or puppy club leader can suggest one. The Seeing Eye will cover all the pup's veterinary costs.

Who is responsible for the puppy's food?

The Seeing Eye provides a stipend to help defray the cost of food. Your area coordinator will give you an initial 8-pound bag of puppy food. We suggest you purchase the same brand in 40-pound bags at local feed stores.

What is the most important role of the puppy raiser?

You need to show your puppy as much of the outside world as you can so the puppy can become accustomed to its future work environment. Puppies need to be exposed to things such as car trav-



Joan Maione is helping raise Lyric, who may become a Seeing Eye guide dog.

el, sounds, sudden noises, animals, crowds, slippery floors, stairs and stores so they won't be intimidated by these challenges when they're Seeing Eye dogs.

Can we take the puppies anywhere, since they are going to be Seeing Eye dogs?

Although working Seeing Eye dogs are allowed access to all public places, Seeing Eye puppies in training are not. You will need to check with managers or owners before visiting a public place to make sure it is OK. We don't encourage taking puppies to food stores and restaurants.

When can I start taking my puppy places?

Two weeks after your puppy has received its 13- to 14-week vaccination, you can take your puppy out in public.

We have other pets in the house.

Can we still raise a Seeing Eye puppy?

Yes. In fact, this is good exposure for the puppy. But if you have another puppy in your house, it must be at least 5 to 6 months old before a Seeing Eye puppy can be placed in your home.

Is it difficult to give the puppy back for training?

Yes, it is. But knowing that you are raising your puppy to enhance a blind person's independence makes it worth the effort. If you do a good job with your puppy, you can raise another one, which will help to minimize the sense of loss you may feel when your dog returns to The Seeing Eye.

How old will my dog be when he or she returns to The Seeing Eye for training?

About 14 to 16 months old.

What happens when my dog

Pennies for Puppies

Schoolchildren, corporate employees and community organizations have been some of the most generous benefactors of The Seeing Eye by conducting their own community service projects to raise money for it.

These projects are organized through The Seeing Eye's Pennies for Puppies and Dollars for Dogs programs. The difference between the two programs is simple: For participants for whom pennies are the easiest to give, such as young schoolchildren, Pennies for Puppies may be more appropriate; Dollars for Dogs might be a better fit for high schools, civic organizations or corporations.

The Seeing Eye provides posters and other materials to educate participants. It also offers to send an outreach representative (with a puppy, of course!) to make a 45- to 60-minute presentation about the program.

In appreciation for each gift, The Seeing Eye will send the school or organization a certificate indicating the participants have officially sponsored a Seeing Eye puppy.

If you are interested in participating in a Pennies for Puppies or Dollars for Dogs project, call (973) 539-4425, ext. 1778 or e-mail Pennies@seeingeye.org.

returns to The Seeing Eye?

The dog will have a period of adjustment to the kennel. During this time, the dog will be X-rayed and given a health check. The dog will then be assigned to a professional instructor. Over the next four months, the dog will learn to be a Seeing Eye dog. At the end of the training period, you will be invited to watch your dog walk through town with the instructor.

Once the dog is matched with a person, you will receive a letter from The Seeing Eye telling you what state the person and dog live in, and a little information about the person. In order to respect the privacy of the dog's new owner, you will not find out the name of the person who has the dog you raised.

What happens if my dog does not become a Seeing Eye dog?

You will be asked if you would like the dog as a family pet. If you do not, The Seeing Eye will place the dog with a family looking to adopt one. Some dogs are adopted by law enforcement agencies so they can maintain their roles as service dogs.

Source: The Seeing Eye Inc.



Rachel Rottkamp is raising Bally through the Cumberland County Puppy Power 4-H Club. Submitted photo

Seeing Eye

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social schedule is different now that puppy care is a top priority.

"Friday nights, I used to go out with my friends," Ewing said. But in these early days, friends must come over to her house. She also has what seem like "puppy play dates" with Rottkamp and Bally.

It's not up to the puppy raiser to teach the pup how to guide a blind person — that will come later, when the dog returns to The Seeing Eye's headquarters to work with a professional trainer, Higham said.

A puppy raiser's main responsibility is to lavish the puppy with lots of love so the dog learns to trust.

"It helps them do a better job," Higham said, noting the "dog wants to please the owner and that's very important."

Puppy raisers also must teach some basic obedience, including the commands of sit, down and forward, as well as house-breaking, which is called "park time."

They are urged to take the dogs out in public and expose them to many sights and sounds. Locally, the pups have been to stores, a bowling alley and even aboard the Cape May-Lewes Ferry.

When they are in the car, the pups learn to ride on the vehicle's back floor because they cannot sit on a seat when a blind person rides a bus or train, Higham explained, noting the rule is four paws on the floor.

Saying goodbye

When a pup reaches 14 to 16 months old, the area coordinator will pick up the dog. Pup raisers usually get about two weeks' notice that the dog has been scheduled for advanced training.

The most frequently asked question of

puppy raisers: How can you part with the pups?

The relationship changes, but the bond of love doesn't, Maloney said.

"You have to brace yourself," she said. "You know the puppies are going to change someone's life."

Maloney has learned to view it as the pups going off to college.

After four months of training, the puppy raisers get the opportunity to see their dog one more time before it heads off to a new life of service. They are invited to Morristown to witness their dog leading a trainer through the downtown.

There is no contact with the dog. The pup raiser must watch from afar.

"Some people say, 'I could never go and watch it — it would be too hard,'" Higham said. "I encourage it. You would be so amazed at what your dog accomplished. To see your dog guiding someone, to see the dog is thinking — it's amazing."

Maloney has done it, and admits there were tears.

"You're so proud," she said. "It takes strength to raise them and then let go."

The dogs are matched with a blind person whose lifestyle suits the animal's personality, even down to the speed of their walk. The dogs usually work five to seven years before retiring.

"They've done their job well and need to move on," Higham said, noting many dogs go to family or friends of the blind person.

Those who don't are found homes through The Seeing Eye. People may sign up to offer a home to retired guide dogs.

Not all dogs make it through the rigorous guide training, however. Maloney learned her pup, Zella, was unable to work in the field due to a physical problem.

"We adopted her," Maloney said. Zella is now the grand dame to the pups that arrive, including the Maloneys' most recent pup, Lyric.

History of The Seeing Eye

Since 1929, The Seeing Eye has partnered with people who are blind who seek to enhance their independence, dignity and self-confidence through the use of Seeing Eye dogs.

More than 15,000 of these specially bred and trained dogs have brought a new level of mobility, safety and self-sufficiency to almost 8,000 men and women.

In 1927, Morris Frank read an article about dogs being trained as guides for blinded veterans of World

War I. Frustrated by his own lack of mobility as a young blind man, he was inspired to write its author for help.

Dorothy Harrison Eustis was an American training German shepherd dogs in Switzerland, and when she received Frank's letter, she agreed to help him. He promised he would return to the United States and spread the word about these wonderful dogs.

In 1928, having completed instruction in Switzerland, Frank arrived in New York City, proving the ability of his dog, Buddy, before throngs of news reporters. His one-word telegram to Mrs. Eustis told the entire story: "Success." The Seeing Eye was born, with the dream of making the entire world accessible to people who are blind.

— Courtesy of The Seeing Eye Inc.



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