

people to know

PUPPY LOVE

A structural engineer and his wife prepare furry, four-legged friends for futures as guide dogs.

WHEN LEONARD JOSEPH and his wife, Nancy, became empty-nesters, a relative suggested they get a dog.

So they did. But they took the suggestion a lot further than that.

Having just retired from heading the New York Law Institute, and with their son off to law school, law librarian Nancy noticed a poster at a library soliciting volunteer puppy-raisers for the local guide dog school. Realizing this would provide an excellent opportunity to have a dog and help others at the same time, the couple became puppy-raisers for Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB) upon moving to Laguna Beach, Calif., from Long Island, New York.

Nearly 10 years later, they are still at it. Leonard, a principal at Thornton Tomasetti with more than 38 years of structural engineering experience—including structural design for Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and the steel-framed Taipei 101 in Taipei, Taiwan—explains the training process, noting that it starts at birth; all of GDB's dogs come from their own breeding program, which allows them to track both behavioral and medical traits.

Once they reach two months, puppies are weaned and delivered to volunteer puppy raisers to be trained in good house manners, including proper relieving habits, staying calm (for a puppy) and responding promptly to a dozen basic obedience commands, such as “Sit” and “Wait” and “Come” (crucial for their blind future partners). Once four months old and protected by vaccinations, they are gradually taken out and about, wearing the “puppy coat” that means “on duty” to them and “I am learning” to the public. Raisers socialize the puppies on walks, bus and train rides and visits to stores, restaurants, movie theaters, offices and other public places so that these will be familiar settings once they are doing guide work.

At approximately 16 months of age they are mature enough to return to GDB (which is based in San Rafael, Calif.) for formal guide training, including traffic, curbs and stairs, height obstructions and much more. At the end of that process, taking at least two months, the successful dogs are paired with

their visually impaired partners to train another two weeks together. All this effort and support is provided solely through donations, as GDB receives no government funding and charges nothing for the dogs or the training.

Fortunately, the puppies generate plenty of interest and curiosity on their own. “Walk a puppy-in-training and the whole world wants to meet you (and him or her),” says Leonard. “We try to always take the time to answer questions because you never know the outcome. One couple we met at a local art show ended up joining our group and has raised several puppies. Another couple at the weekly farmers’ market was so impressed with our pup’s demeanor that the visually impaired husband has signed up to get a guide dog. So even the pups that don’t go on to become guides end up serving a positive purpose.”

The Josephs have raised nine puppies thus far: a black Labrador retriever and eight yellow Labs. They’ve had their current trainee, Newcastle, a male yellow Lab, for four months. While they enjoy their work immensely, giving the puppies back for training is always difficult.

“Practice doesn’t make it any easier,” says Leonard. “But watching your pup, or another dog, graduate and do good guide work confirms exactly why the effort is worthwhile. These dogs not only enhance mobility and travel safety, they also are best buddies and furry icebreakers against the isolation that loss of vision can cause.”

With a decade of experience in training puppies, Leonard is adamant about proper etiquette when approaching guide dogs in public. He notes that people shouldn’t reach out and pet or call to a dog in coat or harness without asking the partner first, as this can cause the dog to lose focus by looking for attention from bystanders. He also explains that other dog owners should restrain their pets around working dogs since once bitten, a guide dog will never be able to guide safely again; it will focus on avoiding other dogs rather than watching for traffic and steps.

While the dogs are trained to take their work seriously, they still know how to have a good time.

“People worry about whether ‘the dogs have any fun,’ says Leonard. “Yes, they do! Once the puppy coat or guide harness comes off at home, they romp, play tug-of-war, chew on their toys, roll around, get lots of loving and handling—just about everything a pet would do, except ‘catch’ and ‘fetch’ games, which could be distracting and dangerous when guiding.”

“And those dogs that graduate from training have succeeded because they enjoy the work, whether having the opportunity to get out and about, taking charge or thinking through a novel challenge such as a construction barrier on a familiar route. As with humans, do what you love and you’ll never have to ‘work’ a day in your life.”

MSC



◀ Leonard Joseph and Newcastle, a seven-month-old yellow Labrador retriever.