

Lending a Paw: Local Guide Dog Organization Seeks Volunteer Puppy Raisers

by Katie Avagliano

After finishing an hour-long lunch in a crowded restaurant, a woman gets out of her chair and waits a moment as a puppy sleepily trots out from under the booth. Nearby tables, seated during the service, turn as the Labrador stretches and sits. "I had no idea a dog was there!" someone at the next table gasps.

The woman smiles, tugging the leash of the not-quite-one-year-old puppy. "That's the highest praise we can receive."

This particular puppy is being raised for the Seeing Eye, the oldest guide dog school in the country. Bred and raised for service, it will take about two years before the Labrador, golden retriever, or German shepherd puppy is matched with a visually impaired human. This partnership is life changing. Guide dogs help their humans cross the street, navigate stairways, and avoid obstacles. They also bring confidence and companionship. More than one visually impaired person describes these dogs as their "independence."

But you can't get that well-trained guide dog without lots of work. And the Seeing Eye is always in need of volunteers to welcome puppies into their homes.



(volunteers with their German shepherds at a local craft fair)

"It takes a village to raise a puppy," says Peter Avagliano, leader of the Atlantic-Cape May County Seeing Eye club, People and Puppies at Work for Sight (PPAWS). "Which is why you don't do it alone."

Puppy raisers come from all walks of life. Families who want to "trial" a dog for a year before committing to a dog for a decade; college students who want to show a pup a campus; retirees who want to give back to the community with a new companion at their sides. Have a cat, another dog, a horse, a flock of chickens? Perfect! These pups need to be exposed to all sorts of environments! The job of a puppy raiser is housebreaking, basic obedience, and socialization. And if you've never raised a dog before? That's where the community comes in.

PPAWS meets once a month to socialize the pups and train the raisers. This is puppy support group, where behavioral problems can be addressed, plans for outings can be made, and sitters can be arranged. The group travels to Newark Airport once a year to navigate TSA, takes the Cape May-Lewis ferry to trial boat rides, and regularly arranges outings to Philadelphia, New York City, and local theatrical performances, all in the name of making dogs that will be able to handle any environment.



(A group of puppies on a bus at Newark airport)

All food and veterinary costs are covered by the Seeing Eye. Volunteers are asked only to open their hearts and their homes for about a year, from the time an eight-week-old puppy is delivered to their door to the time they send a fourteen-month-old dog back for "formal training."

Through PPAWS, where my father is the leader, I've helped to raise eighteen dogs for the Seeing Eye, with nine of them going on to become guide dogs. The question I get most often as a volunteer is: how do you give the puppy up? And eighteen dogs later I feel I have the experience to say that while of course it's always a sad day, it's also a proud moment. When raising a child, we imagine futures in which they can be independent and of service to their community. When raising a guide dog puppy, we know that they were born to fulfill that destiny.

There are Seeing Eye puppy raising clubs in every New Jersey county and into Delaware and Philadelphia. If you're interested in learning more, please visit www.seeingeye.org.