

Future leader dog Spinner, which Hegenbarth is now raising, gets camera-shy.

Puppy Love

Almost a year ago this month, I toured the Seeing Eye School of Morristown, N.J., helped staff transport seeing eye dogs to nearby New York City and then, while blindfolded, was taught how to harness a dog and “walk blind” through New York streets.

I went from being terrified to trusting, confidently navigating with the dog’s help. The experience brought me full circle from raising puppies for Leader Dogs for the Blind, an institution similar to the Seeing Eye, to handling a trained dog.

At seven weeks of age leader dogs—primarily German shepherds, Labrador and golden retrievers, standard poodles or mixes of these breeds—are issued to a volunteer puppy raiser, who will housebreak and train them in basic obedience commands such as sit, come, down and stay. They learn to “heel,” or walk on their caretaker’s left at a loose leash, meaning they cannot pull ahead

or drag behind, which strains the leash. They also learn some career-specific commands, such as to go under, around, left and right.

Going Everywhere

Perhaps my most important task is acclimating them to public places. That means, if possible, I take the puppies with me everywhere I go. In public, the puppies are taught to respond to the “under” command by quietly getting under chairs, tables, church pews and such. They must learn to accompany their masters anywhere, including restaurants, churches or a doctor’s office, without being obtrusive.

We teach the puppies to walk calmly beside a shopping cart while in a supermarket and not get their paws run over by its wheels. They must also learn not to sniff at or try to eat any of the tempting food items in the store.

The puppies also learn to remain calm in loud or confusing situations that might frighten them and to deal with crowds and people who may try to pet or get the dog’s attention. The puppies learn to ignore these distractions and learn that when they wear their jackets—the precursor to their guide harnesses—they are not just regular dogs but working guides.

I can only let them play with toys that won’t choke or hurt them, and I can never let them play with a ball; if they associate balls with fun they could later, while working, be distracted by someone playing with a ball. I must discourage them from reacting to cats, squirrels, birds, rabbits or other dogs. I also cannot give them “people food” or even excessive doggie treats; they must learn to never beg at the table while their owner is eating.

Retiree raises young leader dogs /// *By Hava Hegenbarth*

Early Interest

I first got interested in guide dogs while still in the Foreign Service. While stationed in Gaborone, Botswana, I visited the Seeing Eye's Web site and made a donation. They thanked me and invited me to visit when I was next in the United States. When I did so, they asked me whether, after retiring, I'd be interested in raising puppies for them.

I was delighted and so were they—until they heard I was retiring to Iowa. That was too distant, but they did advise me to contact Leader Dogs, which is based in Rochester, Mich. When I retired, I applied for a Leader Dogs pup and later received the first of three I've so far raised.

The first, Dobie, a male black Labrador, did not make it as a dog guide and was "career-changed"—he became someone's pet. My second, Solomon, another male black Lab, is now a working guide dog in Illinois. My latest, Spinner, a female black Lab, shows great potential to also become a working guide.

After the raiser raises a puppy for approximately a year, Leader Dogs sends a letter that informs the raiser that it's time for their puppy to return to the



Left: Spinner tries on a harness. **Above:** Spinner relaxes with Bax, Hegenbarth's own dog. Bax was given to Hegenbarth as a puppy at her last post, Port Louis, Mauritius.

school to begin formal training. This is always a sad time for me, because I've come to love the puppy. What gets me through this time, though, is knowing this leader dog is part of something special and that, by raising him or her, I've become part of it, too.

The letter's arrival means I will again begin the long journey to Rochester, just outside Detroit. Once there, the Leader Dogs staff gives me some private time to say goodbye to "my" puppy. With Spinner, for instance, I know I'll hug her and tell her to become the best leader dog she can be.

Then, a Leader Dogs staff member will lead her away, and I know that I'll cry. But I also know I'll be proud of and hopeful for this future leader dog who will bring a sense of freedom and independence to its owner. ■

The author is a Foreign Service retiree.