Raising Puppies for the Blind is a 24/7 Job for Pharmacy Student

Mallory Nelson, a first-year pharmacy student, has always loved dogs, so it’s not a stretch of the imagination that she’d have one living with her during college. The unusual part is that she’s training Pepsi, a black laborador puppy, to be a guide dog for a blind person or someone with a serious disability.

“I first saw the guide dogs on campus about two years and was curious about them,” said Nelson, who found information about the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind on the internet. “Pepsi is actually the second dog I’ve trained; Ivory, a yellow lab, was the first."

Raising the puppies is a full-time responsibility that requires constant companionship and complete dedication to their training, she added. Applicants must go through a rigorous training period themselves to make sure they’re suited to be raisers. They’re tested on their handling skills with dogs of different breeds and different personalities and assessed on their experience with dogs in order to receive a puppy that matches their skill level. A home visit is a must to make sure the puppy’s environment is suitable.

At seven to eight weeks old puppies begin their training, which lasts about a year and includes adjusting to their environment, learning basic commands, memorizing new routes, locating physical structures, such as doors, chairs, ramps and elevators, and reacting appropriately for safety concerns.

“Pepsi has an easy temperament and enjoys meeting students around campus,” Nelson said. “Each day we either walk to class or ride the bus. During class Pepsi usually sleeps.”

The New York-based Foundation has around 75 puppy raisers in the Athens area, which has the largest group of raisers anywhere in the U.S., said Jessica Jones, the Foundation’s area coordinator.

Only the most suitable dogs are placed with blind handlers, where they’re expected to remain healthy companions for seven to nine years, or longer. After becoming compatible with a blind person in the new environment, the dogs undergo another three to four weeks of training to learn the new handler’s patterns and routes.

“We try to place the perfect dog in the best possible environment,” Jones stated, adding that prospective blind handlers must have a stable life style and prove themselves to be good candidates for companion dogs.
“We’re one of only a few guide dog schools that pays all expenses for the blind handler receiving a
dog, including housing at the Guide Dog Foundation, training, harness and leash,” she noted.
Those not selected for service for the blind may become Vetdogs, which are used as balance dogs or
retrieving dogs for veterans with disabilities such as lost or impaired limbs. Sometimes the dogs themselves
develop physical problems or illnesses; others are deemed more suitable as breeders.
“During his year in training Pepsi was chosen to become a breeder, rather than a companion dog,
due to his good hips and temperament,” Nelson said.
If any dogs are not good for service, she noted, their raisers may have first option for adoption.
“This entire experience has been so rewarding,” Nelson added. “I was so honored to be able to attend
my last dog’s graduation in New York where I met his new owner. Everyone is so dedicated and appreciative;
I definitely expect to raise another guide dog.”

-30-