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Getting help from human's best friend

Members of "Four on the Floor" dedicate their time to giving people eyes

By Anne Le Chevallier
 Oregon Daily Emerald

Castle, a four-month old puppy, could have spent his days stealing socks and chasing tennis balls. At most, he would have been house-trained. But Castle's pedigree and green jacket distinguish his elite status. The 30-pound Labrador retriever is a puppy in training to be a guide dog.

Castle has one year to learn obedience, good manners and social skills. Like a foreign student, he must adapt to a new language and culture.

After a year with his temporary owner Kristina Leipzig, Castle will attend formal training at Guide Dogs for the Blind's campus in Borning. If Castle does not have the right temperament, level of confidence, health or social skills, he will fail. About half of the original puppies graduate, while the rest return to their adoptive owners.

If Castle passes training, he will become part of a "working team." As a guide dog, he will walk his blind partner around obstacles such as telephone poles, mail boxes and street barricades. Practicing "intelligent disobedience," Castle will disobey orders that could cause his partner harm. For example, he will refuse his partner's command to walk into traffic.

For now, Castle's commitments are minimal. Leipzig, a junior biology and chemistry major, takes her puppy to weekly meetings and outings with the puppy-raising support group, Four on the Floor. The local group visits diverse environments such as buses, trains, water parks and outdoor markets together to socialize the puppies and expose them to different sights, sounds and smells. On Oct. 31, the group plans to go trick-or-treating at Gateway Mall.

Members of the group want to expose their pets to everyday life. To do this, they take their puppies to work at places like a hospice, a community college and a science lab. The puppies are prepared mentally for their careers by living and traveling with their owners, said Carol Stinson, the group's co-leader.

"If they had been raised in a kennel and suddenly put in Portland or San Francisco, they would freak out," she said.

Heidi von Ravensberg, one of the College of Education's outreach liaisons, has used guide dogs for 20 years to help her navigate and travel. She considers Curry, her guide dog since 1997, her best friend.

The University graduate said that activities people consider mundane, such as climbing stairs or taking an elevator, could scare guide dogs and scar them for life. Von Ravensberg said she appreciates the time, love and care that the owners donate to their temporary pets.

"What they do is so important," she said.

The Americans with Disabilities Act ensures that working teams have access everywhere the public is allowed. However, puppies in training do not have these privi-



(guide dogs)



Sarah Cohen Emerald

leges because they are not yet assisting a disabled person. Even though Castle and other puppies in training wear green jackets to alert the public about their careers, not all businesses are accommodating. When Leipzig wanted to eat at a local restaurant, the management would not let Castle inside, she said. Even though Leipzig explained Castle's job training, the restaurant refused to serve them.

"It's a shame," von Ravensberg said. "That's how a dog gets to know its job."

Stinson described blind people as active. She said they run marathons, hike, teach and own businesses. At the last guide dog graduation, she even met a blind man who enjoys skydiving.

"The dogs allow them to move freely around ... where they want to go," Stinson said.

Von Ravensberg, who is now with her third dog, said, "I can work faster with a guide dog. (Traveling) takes less of my concentration."

Stinson said she hopes more puppies will be placed at the University because the blind need guide dogs familiar with school environments.

"It's important for people to know about Guide Dogs for the Blind, so when they encounter a working team in a restaurant or elsewhere there is not as much awkwardness," Leipzig added.

By taking their puppies with them everywhere, Four on the Floor members educate the public about the need to become more safety conscious when they see a guide team at work. At noon on Oct. 15, Four on the Floor members are planning to meet at the corner of 8th Avenue and Mill Street for a down-

town walk during peak traffic.

Von Ravensberg said the public should be aware that petting, feeding or talking to guide dogs while they're wearing their harnesses distracts them from their work. She said Curry does not know how to get to destinations; he follows her directions. When he gets distracted by people or loose dogs, von Ravensberg said she can become confused and disoriented.

"All of a sudden I don't know where I am and which way I am going," she said.

The rules for training puppies, on the other hand, are more relaxed. As long as people ask first, Leipzig lets them pet Castle so he becomes familiar with human touch. Without sight, blind people rely on touch and smell to know if their dogs are healthy. Leipzig said she believes the physical attention will prepare Castle for distractions as a guide dog. One day, Castle will have to remain under control when greeting people.

In a year, Castle will leave Leipzig to attend formal training with an instructor and his new, blind partner. Although his care and education is worth \$60,000, donations will keep him cost-free to his partner.

If Castle passes school, Leipzig will officially present him to his partner. Stinson, who has raised a guide dog, said it is "very, very hard" to give away a puppy.

"But at graduation, you really see why you do it and why you go through it," Stinson said. "You are giving people eyes."

For more information, see www.guidedogs.com.

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