



Guide puppy

Polaris may someday see for a blind person

Polaris may someday be the eyes for a blind person. But first, the golden retriever must go through a rigorous training period and pass several demanding tests before becoming a guide dog for the blind.

The nine-month-old puppy is only the second dog to be trained as a guide dog for the blind in Sandy. He's being trained by 17-year-old Sandy High School student Chris Burks. Burks is a capable trainer, as she has been training dogs for six years in the 4-H dog program. She is currently training three show dogs at the same time she is training Polaris.

Chris and Polaris first met in February when the puppy was four months old. Polaris was flown to Burks from San Rafael, Calif., where he was bred and raised at the Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. kennels. Burks will keep the golden retriever until he is 14 to 18 months old.

At that time, he will be flown back to San Rafael, where he will go through the final stage of his training before being matched up with a blind person.

Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. is a non-profit organization which trains dogs for qualified blind people. The organization breeds and raises its own dogs. When the puppies are four months old, they are sent out to 4-H trainers throughout California, Oregon and Washington, where they will receive initial training in a home atmosphere.

One of 7 in Clackamas

Polaris is one of seven guide puppies being trained currently in Clackamas County. The other six are in the Milwaukie and Oregon City area, according to Chris's mother, Barbara.

The only other guide puppy to be trained in the Sandy area was Webb, a German Shepherd trained by Nancy Olson. Olson, who has since moved to Milwaukie, was a classmate of Burks. Webb has completed his training and is now living in Oklahoma City.

Forty guide puppies are being trained statewide. Along with Polaris, Burks is training two black cocker spaniels and a Siberian husky to be show dogs. A pet dog makes a fourth dog that Polaris has as a companion. Polaris has similar training as the three show dogs except his training is a little more intense.

According to a 16-page manual given to the 4-H trainers by the guide dog organization, Polaris must learn the six basic obedience commands plus he must learn several habits which will be useful as a guide dog. He must learn the commands of sit, heel, stay, come, down and to

retrieve.

In addition, Polaris must learn to leave unattended food alone, to ignore distractions like people talking to him or petting him while with his master, to walk in crowds and traffic and to not panic around loud noises.

Polaris's training is coming along well, Burks says. The puppy knows the six basic commands, even though as a puppy he is still easily distracted from them at times. However, he knows his commands so well that he earned 198 out of a possible 200 points at the Silverton Dog Show on June 23. He had a tough AKC judge in that show as he had to perform a long down and sit. He had to stay for three minutes at the end of a six-foot long leash while Burks was at the other end.

Polaris retrieves everything in sight, according to Burks.

"He picks up everything, including pencils, socks and shoes," Burks said. "Anywhere he sees socks or shoes, he'll bring them to me."

Burks said that Polaris is being trained to pick up metal things, such as cans and keys. He must also learn to pick up all types of clothing and bottles, anything that a blind person might drop.

The golden retriever also performs well in crowds, as he was taken around the large crowds at the Sandy Mountain Festival on July 8 and he wasn't bothered a bit. He is not fazed by loud noises and he is learning to walk in grocery stores and other businesses that a blind person might go into.

Polaris wears a large green "jacket" that says Guide Puppy on it and Burks lets the store owners know that Polaris is a guide puppy before she walks him in the store. All the local store and business owners don't mind having Polaris in their buildings. There was one grocery store owner who has hesitated at first, however. The owner cited a law that forbids all dogs from being inside grocery stores but Burks showed the owner a copy of a newer law that allows guide puppies and dogs into grocery stores.

Guide puppies are allowed into all business establishments, the same as a trained guide dog with his blind master.

Polaris and Burks walked around Sharon's Food King recently and he seemed to be the center of attention. Children are amazed to see a dog in the store, and they all stopped to pet and pay attention to him. Polaris was not tempted by any of the food. He even walked by his favorite food, bananas, without blinking.



Chris and Polaris, right, walk through Sharon's Food King. The golden retriever must be taught to lead a blind person in grocery stores as well as other businesses. Above, the two walk across an intersection on Highway 26. Cars always stop a long distance from the dog, Burks said.



Guide dogs work about eight years

Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. is listed as a non-profit charitable organization "dedicated to providing highly trained guide dogs and training in their use to qualified blind men and women," according to a four-page guide the organization puts out.

Qualified blind people include persons who are legally blind, who promise to take good care of the guide dogs and don't abuse them and who desire the dog for mobility and independence.

The organization was started in 1942 as a service primarily to serve blind veterans but has since expanded its services to include all deserving blind persons.

The 11-acre complex is located in San Rafael, Calif., and includes student dormitories and dog kennels. Blind students are trained for 28 days with their guide dogs.

The center breeds and raises its own dogs. It only uses German shepherds, Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers. Occasionally, the breeding stock is augmented by donated dogs of exceptional pedigree.

Guide puppies are raised at the kennels until they are four months old. They are then farmed out to 4-H to be raised in a family atmosphere. At 14 to 18 months of age, they are returned to the school for training as guide dogs.

They are then trained approximately five months by a licensed trainer. Each instructor is assigned a string of dogs he or she works with each day. The work begins around the school's grounds, then continues to the residential and business sections of San Rafael and is finally completed by working the streets of downtown San Francisco. Periodically, the instructors are checked under blindfold while working the dogs.

After about five months, the dogs are teamed up with a blind person at the school. The students and their dogs live in the student dormitory at the complex. Man and dog live, eat and work together for the four-week training period.

After the training, the blind person takes the guide dog home. The guide dog usually works eight years, but some have worked until they were 12 years old.

The dogs are looked after well after they become old. The blind person can keep the old dog if he can afford two dogs or else the dog is returned to the center where he will be given to a family. The organization has a long waiting list for families who want dogs from the center.

About guide dogs

Following is some information about guide dogs, compiled by Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc.

A guide dog does not know where his master wants to go. The master must know where he wants to go, how many blocks, which direction to turn, etc. He then directs the dog, who follows his commands and guides him safely to his destination.

Guide dogs can not tell red

lights from green lights. The master listens to the flow of traffic and when he determines it is safe to cross, he signals the dog to go forward. However, if a car is coming, the dog is taught to refuse to obey the command.

The dog is trained to stop at all curbs and wait for the master's command to go forward or turn.

Other duties the dog must perform include: turning right or left on command;

automatically retrieving any object which his master drops; sitting and staying on command; disregarding any other animals which might distract him from his work; and guiding his master safely around pedestrians and obstacles.

It is okay to pet a guide dog with the consent of the master. Petting is a distraction to the dog when he is working, however.

Story and photos by Brad LaBrie