

PUPPY LOVE

Raising a dog to give it up **BY KATHERINE GRIES**

Ah, puppies. Who can resist those galloping, grinning, gamboling bundles of cuddles and kisses? They steal into your heart to become family members, security guards, super-shedders, paper-shredders, stick fetchers and friends. They communicate wordlessly, share good times and bad — and stick with you 'til faithful old age.

But what if you have a physical challenge — say, visual impairment — that makes raising a young puppy a daunting prospect? What if you need a dog not just for friendship but to make simple mobility a reality in your life?

Thousands of puppy-lovers across the country give up those later years with their pups in exchange for a really good cause. Sue Burgess, a Eugene-area dog groomer, is one of those people. One of three Lane County puppy raisers working with Guide Dogs for the Blind, Burgess is now raising her fourth guide dog puppy as an adult.

For Burgess, her pup raising years started in the '70s as a 4-H project. "Back then, raising guide pups was considered a kid's project — there really weren't many adults who were doing it," she says. She successfully raised three guide-dog puppies before graduating from the 4-H program. Her love for animals guided her career choice, and she completed dog grooming school and launched her own business while raising her family.

Later, as her children matured, Burgess found time to reflect upon the good feelings she earned during those 4-H years, and wanted to recreate the experience. She soon discovered Guide Dogs for the Blind — a Boring, Ore.-based not-for profit organization — and signed up for puppy raising duty again. She applied, was interviewed and got the green light.

Once an applicant is approved as a raiser by the organization, says Burgess, the fun begins. A puppy is assigned to the raiser (most pups are bred in Guide Dogs' California facility, but some are donated) and arrives at about 8 weeks of age.



Training begins immediately. "It makes life so much easier once they know how to walk on a leash and relieve themselves on command," Burgess says. "So that stuff starts on day one." Guide dogs must be trained to relieve on command for the convenience of future owners, so the raiser repeats a phrase such as "do your business" each time the pup relieves himself. With verbal cues and lavish praise, the pup soon gets the idea.

House manners are the most critical parts of training, says Burgess. Pups are taught to eat only from their own dishes, and eating "human food" is not allowed. "We don't want them helping themselves from their blind partner's plate," she says. Guide dogs are taught to keep their feet on the floor, not only to prevent them from playfully jumping up on people, but also to keep them off of furniture.

Burgess says that a guide puppy becomes a large part of the raiser's life, noting that her own dogs usually stay at home but the guide puppy goes everywhere with her. There are also separate rules for her personal dogs which a guide puppy soon understands: "My dogs sleep on my bed," she says, "but the guide puppy sleeps on the floor."

Puppies stay with their raisers for 14 to 18 months depending on individual development, and have progress evaluations with a trainer from Guide Dogs for the Blind on

a regular basis. If a raiser has specific problems with a pup, an evaluation protocol is followed. "We want the dogs to be successful, but we also know that not every dog will make it through the training program," says Burgess. Dogs that don't qualify as Guide Dogs are called "career change" dogs and go on to careers in pet therapy or search and rescue work; some work as breeder dogs or hearing or service dogs. Others are adopted by their puppy raisers.

Raising a Guide Dog puppy includes many hours of public socializing with the puppy wearing an identifying jacket — a visual sign that it's a working dog in training. Most people recognize the jacket and don't approach the dog to give special attention. Children seem most aware of this standard, says Burgess. In fact, they tend to teach their parents not to approach. "And you do meet the nicest people," she says, "who walk by and say, 'Thanks for doing that.' It's really heart-warming."

Puppy raisers have local support, meeting regularly with other area raisers and a leader from Guide Dogs for the Blind. The raisers "trade" puppies for several days a month, which helps the young dogs learn to live with and trust other people. During the training months, socializing experiences become increasingly more challenging until puppies have been exposed to shopping malls, grocery stores, elevators and escalators, and have traveled in cars and on public transportation.

When her pup is almost ready for graduation, Burgess plans what she calls a senior trip: She and another raiser from Corvallis take their pups to Portland for a day to experience a busier, more urban setting. "By that time, I know that, yes, this dog is ready to go on to training," she says.

After leaving the raiser's home, the dog spends several more months in training at the Boring campus before meeting and training with a blind partner. After the dog completes team training, the puppy raiser attends a graduation ceremony and officially hands the dog over to its new owner.

But isn't it hard to give up the young dog you have lived with and loved for more than a year? Burgess admits that she hears this question often, and her answer is always the same: "Of course it's hard. I cry. That happens. You take on this challenge knowing that you will be giving the dog away, and that it's helping other people. But you know, I feel so blessed ... I am honored to help because I can." 🐾

THE CAT PACK

A weekend with the furballs at the Expo Center **BY KATIE CORNELL**

Feather boas, Mardi Gras beads and other miscellaneous party supplies hang carelessly from the hundreds of cages. People stroll around, draped in Hawaiian print shirts, plastic leis and the occasional puffy painted T-shirt. Along the perimeter of the room, vendors sell goods including flashy watches, fairy figurines and some top-of-the-line cat furniture. Judging tables are set up on the opposite side of the room. An announcer's voice bounces off the walls; echoing numbers warn the contestants that it's showtime.

It's 1:30 pm on August 11, the opening day of the Blue Hawaii All Breed Cat Show, sponsored by Pacific Rim Cat Fanciers and held at the Expo Center in Portland.

"Nice coat, nice tail ..." a judge says softly as he observes a Tonkinese cat which sits patiently on a small table while audience members admire it.

Neta Cox, the president of the Tonkinese Breed Association, watches the judge. Cox traveled from Clovis, Calif., to show one of her kittens. She points out all of her friends around the venue, including a breeder from Japan. "I love my cats, but the people I have met through these shows have been there for me during huge life changes," she says. She goes on to joke about becoming allergic to cats in the past few years and telling her doctor, "The cats are non-negotiable, so fix it!"

The middle ground is complete feline frenzy. Known as the "benching area," this is where breeders and showers primp their cats before they head to the judging ring. It is also the place where you can really understand personalities of both humans and felines from the cage décor. One cage is show-spirited with hibiscus flowers and a nice beach scene backdrop. Meanwhile, a breeder sits with his legs up on the table, gazing off into space. His feline friends are displayed in a photo collection created by a professional photographer.

At an unoccupied station sits a row of familiar looking cats. On the cage hangs a bubble sign that reads "I'm a naughty, naughty kitty." Next to the cages stands a poster board full of pictures and newspaper clippings. Eye drops, clippers, combs and Infusium 23 "Leave-In Treatment" are scattered about the table.

A group of friendly women swarm around and start to talk about their cats, Japanese Bobtails (the winking cat statues you see at Asian restaurants). The breeder



and exhibitor, Megan Antijunti from Saint Helens, frantically pulls out Obi, Peggy and Devon as their numbers are called. However, she is pleased to talk about her breed as she primps the cats, explaining how cat shows, as opposed to dog shows, are "au naturel." The cat show is a community of friends and families who want to people know about what great animals their cats are.

"This is a labor of love, devotion and dedication. You don't make money breeding cats. I just feel strongly about this breed," Antijunti says.

In Eugene, cat shows happen at the Lane County Fairgrounds. The McKenzie River Cat Fanciers show is scheduled for March, but that doesn't mean people are not getting ready around here. Patty Stewart breeds Persians and other exotics in Springfield. Stewart has been involved in the cat world since 1974 and has made it into a family affair with her daughter, Michelle. Patty loves the chance to show her white cats, but she is also excited to get others involved when she can. "There have been times when there is a young, well behaved child that I let hold my show kitty at a show (breeders rarely allow this). Just seeing that child beam in glory of being allowed to hold that special show kitty makes me feel good." 🐾

Fancy the cats? For more information go to cat fanciers website (www.cfa.org).