

Showcasing Canadian talent in the leadership of volunteers

23.1 - Animals and Volunteering

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Volunteers raise a puppy only to give it up a year later

by Steven Doucette, Manotick, ON

Imagine having a dog in your home, caring for it, falling in love with it and then twelve to eighteen months later, you have to give up that dog. Most people would say, "No thanks". It is a challenge faced by Canadian Guide Dogs for the Blind (CGDB) on a regular basis.

The organization has a program called Puppy Walking, although there is a lot more to the program than walking pups or dogs. The first year of a puppy's life is very formative and of vital importance in the temperamental and physical growth of a young dog. The Puppy Walking Program is the first stage in guide dog training.

CGDB places puppies into the homes of volunteers at approximately seven to eight weeks of age. The puppy walker is asked to provide a loving home and basic obedience training. This includes trying to familiarize the puppy with as many different environments and situations as possible and in all weather conditions. The puppy stays with the volunteer for twelve to eighteen months, after which its potential as a future guide dog is assessed. If the dog is of the right calibre, it returns to the National Training Centre CGDB and enters into formal training with a professional Guide Dog Mobility Instructor.

All activities with the puppies should be directed to the development of habits and characteristics that form the basis of a guide dog. At all times, the volunteer should be judging the puppy's behaviour and asking, "Would this be a help or a hindrance to a future guide dog?"

Luba Schmidt of Ottawa wanted to start volunteering in the community. She has loved dogs all her life, and her retirement was a perfect opportunity to combine her love of dogs with a desire to remain active and social, all while making a contribution to someone's life. Schmidt raised a dog named Lydia, a cross between a golden retriever and Labrador retriever, two breeds predominantly used by Canadian Guide Dogs for the Blind.

Some people are hesitant in taking on this volunteer position. Usually, there are two reasons. One is the lack of experience in training and fear of not doing things right. The other is giving back the dog. One of the most common responses from the public in regard to this program is, "I would do it, but I couldn't give up the dog". CGDB must consider this when canvassing individuals to take on this lengthy but very

rewarding volunteer experience. It is also a reason why the organization retains ownership of the dog at all times and requires the volunteer to sign a legal contract agreeing to this. For CGDB, recruitment comes in many forms. Displays at community events and public locations are often fruitful, especially when accompanied by a young pup or dog in training. However, requesting assistance from the media is usually the most successful method. Most media outlets are pleased to provide coverage for a cause such as guide dogs, and when cute puppy photos are included it draws interest from the public.

Luba Schmidt addresses both points. "Canadian Guide Dogs for the Blind provides great support. There are regularly scheduled visits to help you socialize the puppy and answer all your questions ... obedience training ... all the food, crate, toys, training courses, boarding and veterinary services the puppy will need. You couldn't ask for more."

As for giving up Lydia, Schmidt says, "I look at this philosophically. You raise your children knowing that one day they will have lives of their own. And this is exactly how I looked at raising Lydia. One day she will go on to do wonderful things with her life. She may walk a young bride down the aisle or walk a graduate across the stage at convocation. Is it difficult to give up the pup? Absolutely! Will there be tears? Absolutely!"

The Puppy Walking Program requires a huge commitment and should not be taken lightly. While there are a lot of positives, there are some challenges along the way. For Schmidt, some of the challenges were the special rules that may not apply to pet dogs, such as Lydia not being permitted to play fetch or sleep on the bed. The positive side though is being able to take Lydia to public places such as grocery stores, restaurants and hotels. Schmidt says, "The greatest reward is to know that I am helping to make the life of a visually impaired individual a little easier. A guide dog will provide independence and companionship."

You do not have to be retired to participate. Volunteers have included post-secondary students, part-time workers, homemakers and individuals who work from home or own a business. Some volunteers have arranged with their employer to take the dog to work daily. The main thing is that the pup or dog is not left at home alone all day.

The Puppy Walking Program is active in certain geographical areas only, including near Ottawa, Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria. CGDB has provided its services to visually impaired and blind Canadians from coast to coast, training guide dogs since 1984.

Steven Doucette is Events Coordinator and Assistant to the COO at Canadian Guide Dogs for the Blind. This encompasses the roles of public relations and volunteer recruitment and management. Doucette has been with CGDB for sixteen years and considers guide dogs as his vocation.



Photo: Luba Schmidt with pup Lydia

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