

Puppy Raising for Guide Dogs

Our 5th Guide Dog pup, 'Delphi', came to live with us aged seven weeks in November 2021 and stayed until March 2023, before moving on to her next foster parents, who live close to her Guide Dog training school. As volunteer Puppy Raisers, our role is to care for and nurture a puppy through training and socialisation, exposing them to new environments and experiences before they go on to further training and, hopefully, being partnered with someone living with vision impairment.

As anyone who has ever had a puppy will know, nothing prepares you for the reality that this little ball of fluff is going to change your life in more ways than one. Whilst they do have their cute Andrex puppy moments, they can also be demons in disguise. We've had the privilege of Puppy Raising five Guide Dog puppies and each has come with their own very big personality and quirky habits.

The thing is the pup does not know it's a trainee Guide Dog pup. All it knows is that it's arrived at this new exciting place with lots of interesting smells, textures and noises. Of course the pup is going to be very curious and explore, so will probably mouth, bite or possibly chew – pups 1 and 2 definitely enjoyed our dining room table and chairs; fortunately they both stopped naturally as all known remedies failed to work.

At times it can be overwhelming and exhausting. At the start there is house-training, which is not fun in winter, along with coping with crying and whimpering, not sleeping through the night, nips and bites, chewing everything and encouraging the pups not to bark. Then there is a strong focus on teaching manners; to walk on a loose lead, not to lunge, how to negotiate doorways and steps, recall; the list is endless. Then, of course, Zoomies; for those that don't know, this can occur when your pup is over-stimulated or too tired or, just because it can, it runs around



Helen, Elspeth and Neil with a guide dog puppy on the terrace at Crossley Heath.



the house as fast as it can, darting here, there, and everywhere. For us it's one behaviour that really makes us laugh!

We have access to the Guide Dogs' world-class training programme, 'Puppy Raising for Excellent Partnerships' (PREP), which uses a puppy-centred approach to raise Guide Dog puppies to prepare them for their adult training, based on 'Positive Reinforcement'. As Puppy Raisers, we have access to a range of online training resources, along with face to face classes. However, putting theory into practice is not always that easy and can be downright frustrating; after all, it is you and not your pup that has read the manual!

Gradually, with patience, repetition and perseverance, your pup matures into a boisterous adolescent and then, just when you thought they understood the basics of their name, "sit", "down" and "wait", raging hormones kick in. In our house we try to keep laughing and see the funny side but once in a while we can get worn down. Fortunately there is a lot of peer support from the local Guide Dogs Puppy Raising community. There are weekly lead walks with a coffee stop in a local park and weekly get-togethers

at a country park, where the pups are let off their leads to run, bounce and play.

All too quickly your pup is mature enough to progress to the next stage of their Guide Dogs journey. It's always a shock when this occurs and it's easy to forget the hurdles you've negotiated to get to this stage, but nothing beats the rewarding feeling of loving and raising a puppy who will go on to make an enormous difference to someone living with sight loss.

So why do we do this? I'd always been aware that Guide Dogs helped a visually impaired person be independent but hadn't given much thought to how this happened. When a neighbour became a Puppy Raiser and told us about the scheme, our family decided to apply. After hearing that our first pup 'Jayne' had

qualified we were so proud; she was followed by Lucy, Debbie and Paige.

Once a month we meet up with members of the Halifax Blind Society for coffee and a chat at a local café. There are usually at least four working Guide Dogs and a number of puppies present. Hearing the impact a Guide Dog has made to a person's life is a powerful reason for our family to continue to support Guide Dogs. One commented, "When I go out with my cane I walk very cautiously and bent over but when I'm with my dog I know I stand straight and walk with purpose because he has my back and will keep me safe".

People ask, "How can you give them up?" There are tears and we do not find it easy; each pup has been a part of our family whose needs have been our priority for over a year but, at the end of the day, we have only borrowed a pup; she is not ours. The icing on the cake is when one of the owners of 'our' pups contacts us to let us know where she is and about the impact the Guide Dog she has become is making on their life. Nothing beats the size of our smiles that day.



If you would like more information about Puppy Raising or other volunteering opportunities, go to the Guide Dogs website www.guidedogs.org.uk

ELSPETH (née JOHNSTON), NEIL and HELEN (Class of 1973, 1971 and sixth form 2007)

