

Class outing for guide dogs in Old Town Temecula



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Harmony is a 4-month-old Labrador retriever, but the puppy's life is about much more than toys and treats. Harmony is training to become a guide dog with Guide Dogs of the Desert, a nonprofit group that breeds and trains guide dogs to help the blind.

"Guide dogs give blind people a connection to the world that a cane just doesn't," said Harmony's volunteer raiser, Ruth Carey, of Yucaipa. "Their job is to help bring independence into someone's life."

Volunteers with Guide Dogs of the Desert teach puppies how to get on a trolley in Old Town Temecula on Sunday. The outing helps the dogs get acquainted with a person's everyday life, says Trina Began, deputy director of canine operations with Guide Dogs of the Desert.

On Sunday, Harmony and other guide dogs in training strutted through the streets of Old Town Temecula with their raisers. The outing helped socialize the dogs and allowed them to be acquainted with the environment of a person's everyday life, said Trina Began, deputy director of canine operations with Guide Dogs of the Desert.

At the outing, the dogs went on a trolley, practiced going up and down stairs and learned how to sit quietly at a restaurant with other dogs. Guide Dogs of the Desert has about 90 puppies in training in California and Arizona, said Began.

About 50 percent of the trainees go on to become guide dogs. Those that cannot become a guide dog, usually because of a medical condition, are placed in other service organizations such as therapy programs and search-and-rescue groups.

Guide Dogs of the Desert is moving its training center from Whitewater to a 5-acre facility in San Jacinto. The new facility is scheduled to open in the fall, said Kim Laidlaw, director of public relations for the organization.

Guide Dogs of the Desert relies on volunteer raisers to socialize and train the puppies. A raiser usually takes care of the dog from 2 months old to about 20 months old. The volunteer family pays for the dog's food, vet visits and toys. Carey, who has been a volunteer for 13 years, said the cost works out to be about \$500 per year.

Volunteers agree that it's a small cost compared to how rewarding the experience is to them.

Linda Vieira, of Banning, said people always ask her if it's sad to spend time and train the puppies only to see them leave. "Yes, it's difficult to let them go, but it's so rewarding to know that they will go on to help people who really need it."