

Lions meet Guide Dogs of the Desert

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Susan Steele shows off Louie, her puppy in training.

Never let it be said that lions and dogs cannot be in the same room together. At a packed meeting of the Jan. 27 Safford Lions Club, Lions and dogs did indeed intermingle as representatives of Guide Dogs of the Desert gave a stirring presentation while their dogs sat by, obediently and peacefully.

Esser, Leighton and Louie are unique canines, having been bred specifically as service dogs. Jackie Myers (Leighton's human) explained the mission of Guide Dogs of the Desert, a nonprofit organization based in Palm Springs, Calif.: "Guide Dogs of the Desert improves the lives of the blind by creating opportunities for life-changing independence and by conducting community outreach and education programs."

The organization was founded in 1972 and, since then, has graduated more than 1,000 students. All the dogs are bred at its facility to ensure the highest quality dogs. Volunteers then raise the guide dog puppies from 3 months of age. With the guidance of staff, they expose the puppies to the sights and sounds of the world around

them. Then the dogs receive formal training for eight to 10 months.

The dogs are then matched personality-wise and activity-wise to blind applicants, who live at the Guide Dogs facility for 28 days to learn how to work as a team. Licensed instructors provide follow-up assistance for the life of the team. Applicants are not charged for the dog, related equipment, their stay on campus or postgraduate follow-up.

When asked about a volunteer's difficulty in giving up a dog, Myers had a tearful moment as she recalled the three dogs she has personally raised and how she must hand her beloved Leighton over to a blind person in June of this year. She admitted to having strong emotions but said a volunteer has to keep the bigger picture in mind. Currently, the school has 90 people on its waiting list. One lady waited five years before she was finally matched.

Myers said sometimes, having gone through the training with a guide dog, a blind person cannot bring himself or herself to put trust in an animal and thus might make a decision not to have a guide dog. She said, "The dog has that person's life in its paws." When a match does not occur, the volunteer may take the dog home or place it elsewhere in service. Some dogs have helped with Search and Rescue, therapy, hearing impaired and canine companion services.

Working dogs wear a harness or jacket. They are trained not to eat, drink or relieve themselves while they are working. Lori Murphy, another volunteer, advised to always ask permission to pet a working dog. She said there have been a few incidents in which dogs who were not on leashes charged at guide dogs. Once a guide dog is attacked, it must be retired from service. Murphy said it is important for people to keep their dogs on leashes to avoid this type of incident because so much time, money and energy goes into training the dogs.

Guide Dogs of the Desert is a 501(c)(3) corporation funded by sponsorships. The organization welcomes community support through donations. Information is available online at www.guidedogsoftedesert.org.