

Training puppies provides students with 'Guiding Eyes' for community service

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A group of Alfred University (AU) students has begun a unique community service trend on campus raising Labrador puppies for Guiding Eyes for the Blind (GEB).

The GEB Club was officially founded in fall 2013, although there have been dogs training for the program at AU since 2011, when Corissa Fanning & 13 lived in Openhym Hall as a resident assistant with her puppy, Darrow. Fanning and Darrow were the inspiration for senior Casey Duncan, a sociology/political science major from Stuarts Draft, VA, and junior Emily Rechin, a biology major from Silver Creek, who were residents in Openhym at the time.

“Being first-years, it was always nice to have a dog in the building,” said Duncan.

She and Rechin decided to get involved in the program the following year and were matched with brothers, Jordan and Jester, respectively, who have become the flagship dogs for the club. Since that time, two other AU students have joined the program, with one more currently waiting to be matched with a puppy and several others interested.

The process of training a GEB puppy is intensive. As soon as they are paired with a raiser at eight weeks old, the puppies begin basic obedience and exposure training, learning to contain themselves in different settings and handle a variety of situations. Raisers and puppies attend weekly obedience classes in their region, and at around six months old, the puppies receive their guide dog jackets signifying that they are guide dogs in training.

According to Duncan, one of the most difficult parts of this process is learning - and teaching others - that the puppies have different rules than traditional pets do.

“They are adorable, but they’re still learning,” she said. “They aren’t allowed to roughhouse or play bite, and they have to learn to distinguish between work time and play time.” While they’re wearing their jackets, the puppies are officially “at work” and should be left alone to focus.

While training a GEB puppy is a serious commitment, it is a rewarding experience for the raisers.

“I got to know a completely different part of the Alfred population through Jordan, and a lot of other people have gotten to know me,” said Duncan. Because keeping a dog on campus is so uncommon and requires special permission, she has become acquainted with many of the faculty and staff at the University, and students regularly approach Duncan and her fellow raisers around campus to meet the dogs and talk about the program.

It is also a good opportunity to get involved and give back to the local community beyond Alfred. Not only are the raisers donating a significant amount of their time, but they also pay for many of the puppies’ expenses, including

food and toys.

And, of course, the dogs themselves are the best part of the job.

“There’s always someone that’s happy to see you,” Duncan said. “They’re really good stress relievers and companions.”

After spending 14 months with Duncan and Rechin, Jordan and Jester recently moved on to begin their official training as guide dogs. They will go through a series of health, temperament, and behavior training before entering the four-stage training program. Successful program graduates are then matched up with a visually impaired individual; if they are not a good fit, they may be adopted out or have alternative careers in programs such as autism service or bomb detection.

Duncan plans to continue her involvement with GEB, although she may not raise another dog. There are several other ways to volunteer within the organization, such as home socialization or in-house volunteering at the kennels and training centers.

For more information about the program or how to become a volunteer, attend a Guiding Eyes for the Blind at Alfred University meeting (held on Friday afternoons in Powell Campus Center) or visit www.guidingeyes.org.