

Franklin County 4-H Families Devote Time, Love To Raising Seeing Eye Pups

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CHAMBERSBURG—Danny LaBonte, a slight, soft-spoken 13 year old, is developing a warm relationship with Irene, a four-month-old black Labrador puppy he has had for six weeks. Every day after school, he plays with Irene and takes her for walks. At night, she sleeps on plastic on the floor beside his bed, attached to the bed by a leash. The first few nights Irene spent in the LaBonte home, Danny slept on the floor next to her.

In January 1988, Danny will give Irene away. After that, he will see her only once more in her lifetime.

Danny, a first-year 4-Her, and the six other members of the Seeing Eye Club of Franklin County are raising puppies for The Seeing Eye, Inc. of Morristown, N.J. Club members get the puppies from Morristown at eight weeks of age and return them after 11 months. Those 11 months are filled with firm, loving training.

Danny's mother, Marsha LaBonte of Shippensburg, thinks the Seeing Eye project is much more work than other 4-H projects. "You don't leave the animal outside in a pen," she noted. "You interact with it all the time."

The Seeing Eye project, even more than most 4-H projects, is a family affair. A mother who objects to a dog in her child's room or under her kitchen table would be a big obstacle to a 4-Her who wished to become involved.

Besides performing the usual tasks of feeding and walking the dog, the 4-Hers must keep the dog as their constant companion to accustom it to the type of relationship it will have with its blind master.

The dog must lie obediently under the table at mealtimes. No one is permitted to give the dog table scraps. The dog is also not allowed to have food treats for good behavior, as all rewards must be verbal.

Whenever the dog is outside, someone must be with it. In short, the whole family—not just the 4-Her must devote themselves to making an obedient, well-mannered dog out of a lively puppy. Their only reward is knowing how much that dog will mean to the blind person who receives it.

Danny's family has always had dogs and cats, but was "out of practice on puppies," according to Mrs. LaBonte. "I had forgotten

about the garbage chewing," she said. "It's going to be hard for Danny to give her up, though."

Club leader Donna Boyd and daughter Kelly know all about giving up a dog. "We cried for three weeks after we returned the first one," Donna said. "This time we'll be better prepared." Their 110 pound German shepherd, Vinnie, returned to Morristown March 17. They picked up a black Labrador puppy the same day.

For the 11 months that 4-Hers are "foster parents" to the puppies, they must bring them to monthly training sessions to practice commands the dog must know to assist a blind person. The club also goes on outings to bowling alleys, nursing homes and shopping malls, to accustom the dogs to situations they will encounter as guide dogs.

Donna Boyd leads the training sessions and gives the 4-H handlers useful tips she has learned while helping Kelly raise two guide dog puppies.

When the dogs and kids arrive for a training session, some from as far away as Hagerstown, Md. and Fulton County, Pa., the puppies greet each other enthusiastically. "Let them play a little, but don't let them get nasty," Boyd advised.

A recent training session began with the handlers and their puppies forming a circle. For the benefit of the first-timers in the group, Boyd gave detailed instructions on how the puppy must be handled. "The dog works on your left side," she said. "Take the leash in your left hand and coil the extra in your right hand. Don't wrap it around your hand. Use the dog's name first, then give the command. Be sure you start out walking on your left foot."

Six dogs received the command "Forward." Some, such as Atlas, handled by Rhonda Garling, 16, of Chambersburg, circled effortlessly. Other, younger dogs romped under their masters' feet and tried to drag, rather than lead, them around the circle.

When the dogs are commanded to stop and sit, Boyd told the handlers, "Give your dog words of encouragement when he does something right. Give commands in a firm, low-pitched voice, but when you praise him, do it in a high-pitched voice. This will help him learn the difference."

Rhonda and Atlas demonstrated a figure eight maneuver. Atlas, a 6 month old golden Labrador, is her

third Seeing Eye puppy.

Rhonda recently visited her second Seeing Eye puppy, Dora, in Morristown.

Dora, like all Seeing Eye puppies raised by 4-Hers, returned to Morristown training center at the age of one year. She was given a physical, spayed, and allowed a month to adjust to the kennels. She then worked with a sighted trainer every day for three months, in any weather. It was during this training period that Rhonda was allowed to see Dora. She followed the dog and trainer around the streets of Morristown and watched as Dora learned various techniques she will need to assist a blind person.

One important lesson a Seeing Eye dog must learn is when to intelligently disobey a command his master gives. For example, the dog must disobey the command forward if obeying it would put his master in danger from an approaching car or an obstruction on the sidewalk.

When the three months of intensive training are up, Dora will be placed with a blind person and undergo more training with him or her. Rhonda will then be sent a picture and letter telling her where Dora will live. She will never be permitted to see Dora again after the dog is given to the blind master. "That would be too emotionally difficult for the dog," Rhonda explained.

The Seeing Eye, Inc. covers the costs of raising the puppies, who have been bred for intelligence, size and temperament. When the 4-Hers get the dogs in Morristown, they receive a leash, collar and brush for the dog, along with a training manual. The Seeing Eye reimburses the family for the dog's food. Local veterinarians who perform the required check-ups on the dog may send their bills directly to The Seeing Eye.

Ninety-five percent of the puppies raised by 4-Hers pass The Seeing Eye's physical and are accepted into the training program. The few that are rejected are offered back to the 4-Her who raised them. If the 4-Her is unable to take the dog, it is given a physical to determine if it qualifies for police or narcotics work. Many of the rejected dogs pass that physical and enter the field of law enforcement.

A common reason for rejection by The Seeing Eye is carsickness, an obviously undesirable trait for a dog who must accompany his blind



Danny LaBonte, left, and 11-week-old Irene, compare notes with Chris Richards and Keena. Both dogs are black Labradors.



Kelly Boyd is working to train Vinnie, her 11-month-old German Shepherd.

owner everywhere.

Tory, an 8-month-old German Shepherd being raised by Luke Sanders of Fulton County, was often carsick on the hour-long drive over the mountains to Chambersburg for the monthly meetings. However, frequent car trips with the Sanders family have gradually accustomed Tory to the motion of the car, and Luke is confident that she will pass her physical and be admitted to the training program.

The Seeing Eye project benefits not only the blind persons the puppies will eventually serve, but also the 4-Hers who raise them. The kids, who all seem devoted to their charges, learn day-in, day-out responsibility for another living creature.

A bonus of participating in the

Skinner Wins Regional FFA Award

MIDDLEBURG — James Mark Skinner, son of James Skinner, East Orange, N.J., and Georgiann Skinner, Mt. Pleasant Mills, was recently awarded the Northeastern Region Production Credit Award for outstanding record keeping. The award, a \$100 U.S. Savings Bond, is sponsored by the Production Credit Association.

Mark, a junior at Middleburg High School, qualified for the award by winning a gold medal in the recent FFA Pennsylvania Record Book Contest.

Mark won in the over 6 enterprise category. His FFA

Seeing Eye Club is learning to speak in public. During a recent demonstration at the Franklin County Nursing Home, several of the club members gave talks about the history of The Seeing Eye, the training the dog will receive after it returns to Morristown, and experiences they have had with their dogs. The group also demonstrated the dogs' ability to obey commands.

While most of the handlers are 4-Hers, 4-H membership is not a requirement for obtaining a Seeing Eye puppy. At least one adult is raising a puppy, and more are welcome.

More information and an application may be obtained by calling Donna Boyd at 264-9192 or Bob Kessler at the Franklin County Extension office, 263-9226.

projects include beef finishing, dairy cow, dairy heifer, market lamb, corn for grain, corn for silage, alfalfa hay, mixed hay, rye, wheat, and oats. Mark was November Student of the Month at Middleburg High School and was named SUN Area Star Farmer.

The Regional Production Credit Area includes the counties of Bradford, Juniata, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, Mifflin, Union and Lycoming, Clinton, Columbia, Lackawana, Luzerne, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Wayne and Wyoming.



Residents of the Franklin County Nursing Home enjoy an opportunity to make friends with a guide dog puppy.