

4-H'er Becomes Star On Disney's Hall Of Fame

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FISHING CREEK (Dauphin Co.) — Although Katy Yingst is only 16 years old, she has given five blind people eyes to see.

Her gift of sight to the blind is actually in the form of seeing eye puppies that she has been raising for the past 10 years. The dedication, hard work, and tears shed in this effort have mostly been done without fanfare, but Katy will soon be in the national spotlight because her work with seeing eye puppies will be highlighted by Disney MGM Studios in an upcoming television program called "Hall of Fame."

Katy was only 10 years old when she read an article about raising seeing eye dogs. In response to the article, Katy and her mother traveled from their Harrisburg farm to the Lancaster 4-H Seeing Eye Club. Within four months, Katy received a female German Shepherd to raise for the seeing eye program.

Those raising seeing eye puppies are required to take the dog to church, stores, restaurants, and all types of social activities. These visits expose the dog to various situations, sounds and smells, which enables training to go much easier.

"Otherwise the dog would just freak out in crowds," Katy said.

While most restaurants and many public places do not allow dogs inside, special exemptions are made for seeing eye puppies and dogs. Katy and those who raise the puppies carry a special card that identifies the puppy as part of the seeing eye program. No place has refused to admit Katy and the puppy that she is training. The puppies are well behaved because they are always taught to lay quietly at the master's feet in a restaurant. The dogs are specially bred as seeing eye dogs and with traits such as being laid back and small in size considered positive.

Katy's puppy sleeps with her and is taught simple commands such as sit, stay down, and rest. The puppy must never be fed table scraps.

Participants in the program must return female dogs when they are one year of age. Because it takes male dogs longer to mature, they

are returned between 16 and 18 months.

The painful parting is always accompanied by tears.

Katy said that she has cried all night on several occasions. "But knowing that there are five blind people with independence because of my dedication makes it all worthwhile," she said.

Katy now has her sixth dog for the program. In September, it will be returned for training. At that point, it will be screened for various problems such as hip problems (common among German Shepherds) or for misbehavior or chasing animals. If it does not pass the criteria, it will be rejected, and Katy will be allowed to keep the dog. But every dog that Katy has raised has passed the requirements and has been placed with a blind person.

Her present dog, Jamie, appears to have great potential because he won best of class and show at the Reading Small Animal Show. That is the only show that Katy enters her dogs.

Katy said the pain of separation with Jamie will be eased by receiving another puppy to train. In the program, the new puppy is traditionally given the same day that the older one is relinquished, but sometimes a new puppy is given several weeks before the older one is returned to the program.

Although Labradors and Retrievers are also trained as Seeing Eye dogs, Katy said that she fell in love with her first dog, which was a German Shepherd, and has been in love with that breed ever since.

Four-H'ers raise only one puppy at a time, but occasionally that time may overlap by a few weeks. Having two puppies at the same time did not arouse jealousy among the dogs. Instead, Katy said, "They acted like brothers. When I had to return the older one, my new puppy acted like he missed him as much as I did."

The pain of parting is intensified by knowing that for two weeks her dog will remain in a kennel with no personal attention. The dog becomes extremely lonely. While this seems cruel, it is necessary so that the dog becomes so desparate for companionship that it will quickly bond to the trainer for an



Although Katy is primarily responsible for her seeing eye dog, Katy's brother Craig, mother, and other family members happily help with the care required.

intensive three-month program; otherwise, the dog would not cut all emotional ties to Katy and would not be as cooperative in training.

During the training period, the seeing eye dogs are taught intelligent obedience, to avoid obstacles, and to think for themselves.

At the end of the three-month training, Katy and others who raised the puppies are invited to watch a demonstration of the dogs obeying commands.

"It's unbelievable to see the cute little puppy that you have raised leading a person through life-and-

death situations. It's the most rewarding part of the program," Katy said.

She and fellow 4-H'ers must stay at least one half block behind the puppies that they have raised.

Although it is extremely difficult not to be able to hug the puppy that she has raised for a whole year, Katy finds that by watching the training demonstration, she more fully realizes the important job that lies ahead for her puppy.

"I finally feel that I can let him go, since he will make a blind person be able to see."

Katy gets tears in her eyes when she thinks of the difference her dog will make in a blind person's life.

Although Katy does not learn the identity of those who receive her dog, she does know that one is in North Carolina with a blind man, another in Pennsylvania with a blind woman, another in New Jersey with a blind woman, another in Virginia with a blind man, and another in New Jersey with a blind man.

One time, Katy met Flash, a dog that she had raised. Although she talked to him, Flash showed no recognition of her.

"It hurt really bad that he did not recognize me, but I knew that it was for the best," she said.

Although Katy is primarily responsible for raising puppies,

she said her whole family helps out. While Katy is at school, her mother, Cathy, cares for the puppy. Help is also given by her 18-year-old sister Becky, her 10-year-old brother Craig, and her dad Robert.

Katy said that her involvement with the Disney program happened because MGM Studios contacted the Seeing Eye program and requested the names of six persons who raised the puppies. Coordinator Chris Dickson said that 415 puppies are presently placed with 4-H'ers. From this pool of names, Katy and six others were selected. Disney conducted telephone interviews with each of the six, who were then asked to write an essay about themselves.

After Katy had received the call from MGM Studios, she immediately sat down and typed a six-page article on her computer. About one week later, she was overjoyed to hear that she was chosen for the part in the film.

The filming was done in Ephrata, where she recreated scenes such as getting up, changing clothes, boarding a bus, giving the dog away, and getting a new puppy.

"My dog cooperated perfectly when he was told to eat and behave a certain way. He made me really

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On the table beside Katy is the trophy she received from Disney MGM Studios when she and Jamie, her seeing eye dog, participated in filming for the upcoming television program.

Homestead Notes