

“Our goal is to raise, socialize, love and protect these puppies, while they are in training to be guide dogs for the blind.”

Special Dogs... Special Trainers

Story and Photos by Mike Shannon

Fourteen-year-old Kari Erickson cried for days.

She was going to Flagstaff to give away Lija, a 21-month-old female golden retriever that she had raised from a puppy.

“We all cried,” Kari’s mother, Michalyn, said.

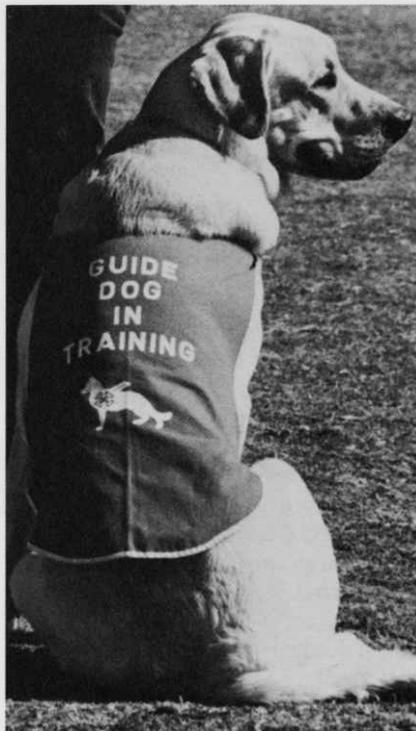
Kari’s 12-year-old brother, Jack, stayed home.

“Jack had already said goodbye to Lija and we had left the house,” Michalyn said. “I forgot something and went back inside, he was lying on the couch just sobbing.”

Jack knew his sister would be giving Lija’s leash to a man who would take the dog to its new home.

That was three years and three dogs ago.

For the Erickson family of Tucson, the process of raising puppies and giving them away has become a family affair. And although giving away a dog isn’t easy, they say the rewards are worth it.



Kari was—and Jack is—a member of the Pathfinder Puppies 4-H Club, a group of 25 Pima County residents who train guide-dog puppies.

“Our goal is to raise, socialize, love and protect these puppies, while they are in training to be guide dogs for the blind,” says Michalyn, the club’s leader.

The excitement in her voice rises noticeably as she speaks of the pro-

gram. “It’s my favorite subject,” she admits.

“We have 13 puppies currently in training,” she said.

The puppies become part of the 4-H member’s family for between 12 and 18 months. Club members provide basic obedience training such as housebreaking, and introduce the dog to as many new situations as possible before returning it to the Guide Dogs for the Blind Inc. breeding and training farm in San Rafael, California.

“We want to return to them a dog who has been exposed to any environmental situation possible—stores, restaurants, even planes and buses,” Michalyn says.

Once the dogs are back on the farm, they begin six months of extensive harness training. During this period, the dogs will either graduate and become guide dogs or “wash out of the program,” Michalyn says. About half of the puppies that start the program graduate, she says.



Jack Erickson and his golden retriever Wendell take a break from guide dog training.



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Eleven of the puppies raised by members of the Pathfinder club have graduated and now are serving as guides to blind people.

Kari, a senior at Rincon High School in Tucson, says she decided to raise a guide-dog pup because "it was something that was going to help someone else and it was a new experience."

But, she says she didn't know how tough it would be to give Lija away.

"It never hit me that I'd really have to give the dog back until it happened," Kari says. "I started spending a lot more time with her. There were a lot of times in my room that I just sat and cried. It hurts and it's really sad."

In March 1983
Michalyn helped form
Pathfinder Puppies
4-H Club to provide
leadership and sup-
port to members who
raise puppies.

But, Kari says it's not all pain and sorrow. She says raising a guide-dog puppy provides a sense of accomplishment, recognition and satisfaction.

Kari first trained Lija in the fundamentals so the dog could pass harness training. She was invited to attend Lija's graduation and present the dog to her new owner. Also, she had done something positive for someone else.

These are the benefits that have led the Ericksons from Lija to Jackson, from Jackson to Wendell and now to Kearny.

Jackson, a male golden retriever, was raised by Kari and Jack. Wendell, also a male golden retriever, was raised by Jack. Jack and Michalyn are now

raising Kearny, a female German shepherd.

Raising and training dogs runs in the Erickson family. Michalyn teaches an obedience-training class for puppies at Old Pueblo Dog Training Club Inc. She served as training director for Handi-Dogs Inc. from 1977 to 1980.

In fall 1983 Michalyn quit her job as a health clerk with the Tucson Unified School District to devote more time to the guide-dog program.

"I have an interest in dogs that help people," Michalyn says. "When Kari got into the dog project in 4-H, we heard about the puppy-raising project. "We applied (to receive a pup for training) in August 1982 and received Lija six months later. It's a rewarding and fulfilling project. And we've grown more excited about it the longer we've been in it."

In March 1983 Michalyn helped form Pathfinder Puppies 4-H Club to provide leadership and support to members who raise puppies.

"When they're (club members) facing their dog going back, they need to know somebody else understands exactly how they feel," Michalyn says. "And when they're anticipating the puppy's coming, it's fun to anticipate together.

"Also, it gives us a sense of identity; we can say, 'We are Pathfinder Puppies 4-H Club; we are raising guide-dog puppies.'"

Not just any puppy can become a guide dog. Guide Dogs for the Blind maintains a select breeding stock of Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers and German shepherds, all registered

by the American Kennel Club.

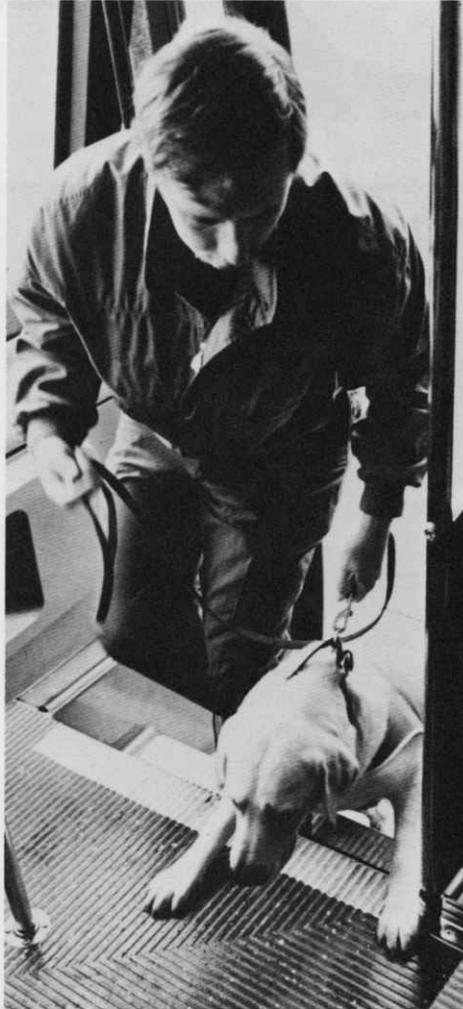
Guide Dogs for the Blind Inc., a non-profit organization that began in 1942, provides guide dogs and a four-week, in-residence training program free of charge to any qualified blind person.

Dogs with a special temperament, intelligence and size have been developed by the school following more than 30 years of breeding and research.

When the puppies are three months old, they leave the school's kennels to begin their initial training in the homes of 4-H members. Members like Jack Erickson whose pride in his club is evidenced by the green T-shirt he wears. The shirt boldly states in white letters, "happiness is raising a guide dog puppy."

On January 11 Jack and Michalyn received their new puppy, Kearny. But on the same day Jack had to give Wendell back. Something he says wasn't easy.

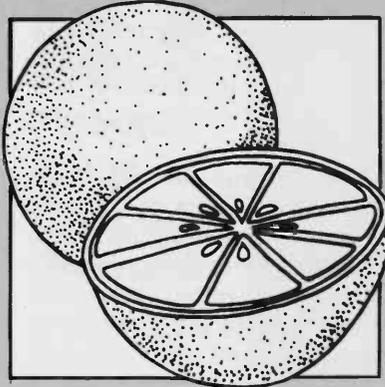
"I was sad that day, but after giving up two dogs already, I kind of knew what to expect," Jack says. "It's not that it was much easier, I was just better prepared. I knew what was going to happen and I brought my Kleenex this time." 



Guide dog training is not confined to the sidewalk. Guide dog candidates also learn to negotiate bus steps and aisles.

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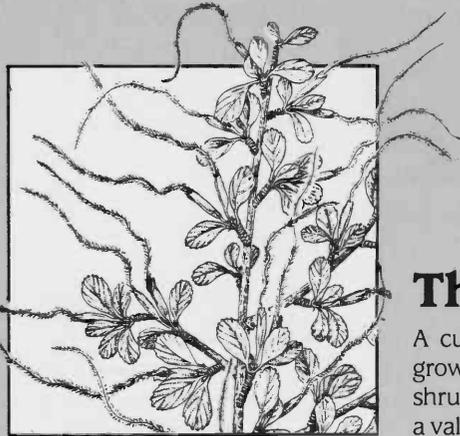
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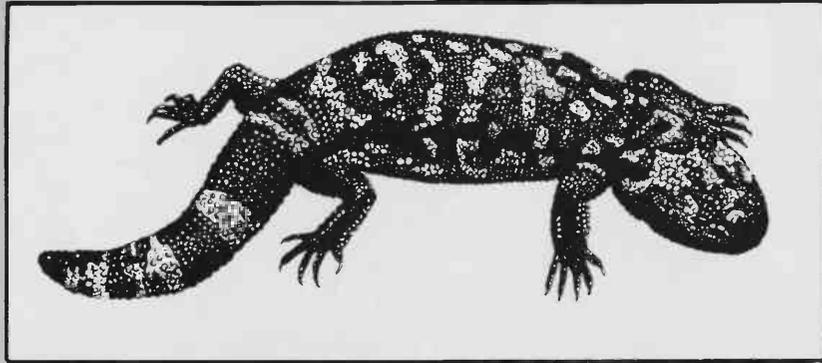
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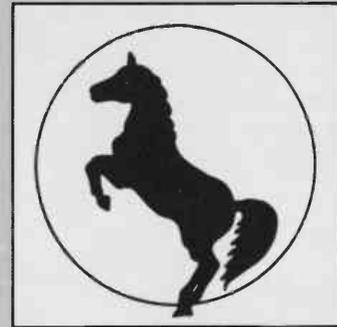
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