# 4-H'ers and Guide Dogs: Preparing for Adulthood

Richard St. Andre, a blind, bearded retiree in Cottonwood, says he's lucky to have a trained guide dog. His is a black Labrador named Bob.

St. Andre became Bob's keeper in 1978 after they finished training separately and together at the Guide Dogs for the Blind headquarters in San Rafael, California. St. Andre had begun losing his sight just a few years earlier.

Bob was bred and born at the Guide Dogs for the Blind kennel, but he lived most of his first two years with the family of a California 4-H member. Guide Dogs for the Blind places its puppies with 4-H'ers for 12 to 18 months to accustom the animals to family life and teach them basic obedience.

Now, St. Andre works with two Cottonwood 4-H members who are raising guide dogs. He helps them understand how important the dogs' behavior and skills will be to the blind people who will get the dogs later.

Though hundreds of 4-H'ers in other states have raised guide dog pups, Stacy Keesler and Kim Kallsen of Cottonwood are among the first 15 Arizona 4-H'ers to try it. Youngsters in six Phoenix families recently said difficult goodbyes to dogs they had lived with since June 1980. Earlier this summer, Chris Rivers of Yuma returned to San

**Photograph: Four-H member Kim Debolt (right) and friends greet her guide dog puppy on arrival day at the Tucson airport. (Photos by Ted Bundy.)**

Top left: Stacy Keesler's 5-month-old trainee Allison (right) lends an ear to role model Bob, Richard St. Andre's working guide dog. Top right: Becky Meyer of Phoenix accustoms her pup Prism to aisles of food at Neb's Market. Lower right: Brad Roachell of Tucson meets his new pupil.

Rafael a prospective guide dog that she had brought with her when her family moved from California to Yuma last year. This April, eight three-month-old pups arrived in Arizona from Guide Dogs for the Blind. Five Pima County 4-H'ers left the county fair just long enough to meet their charges at the Tucson airport. Keesler and Kallsen went to Phoenix to pick up their pups. The eighth went to Ronda Robles of Yuma.

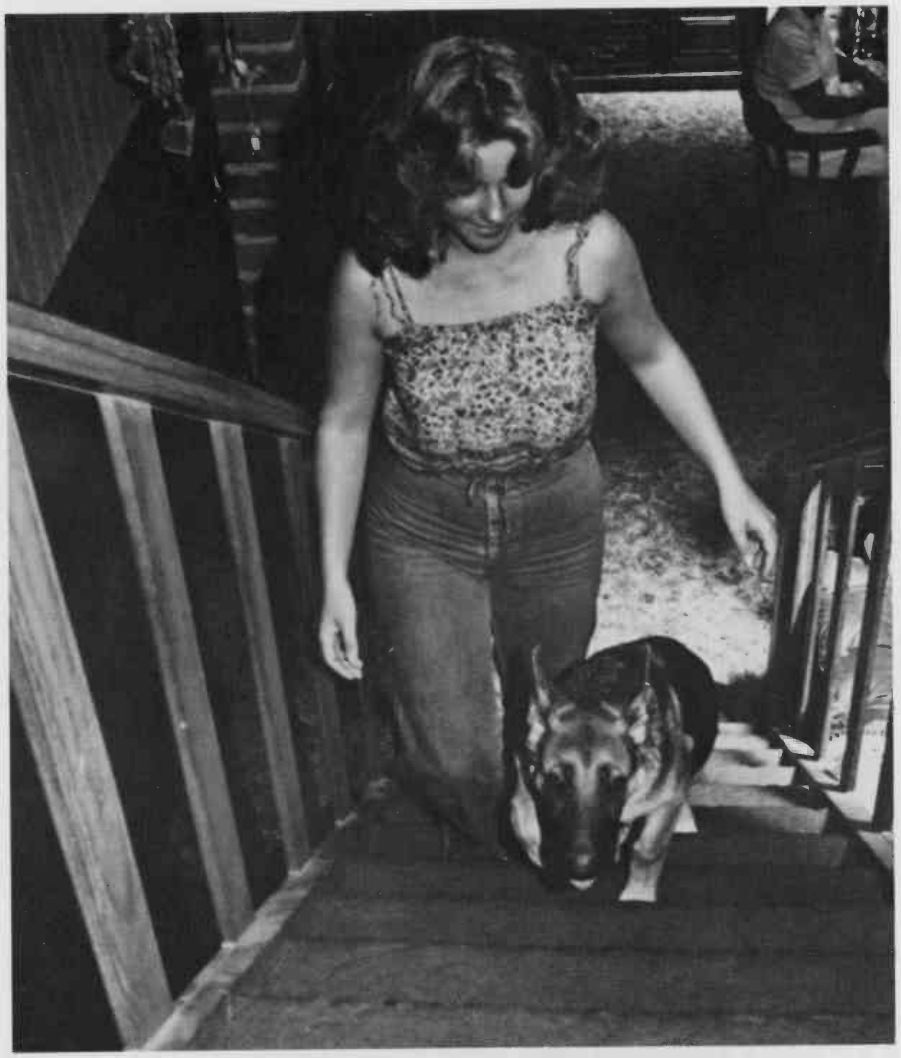
"People in several other counties have expressed an interest in the guide dog program, too," says Al Meier, the Extension 4-H specialist who has started and coordinated the program in Arizona. "I expect we'll have close to 20 pups in the state by next summer."

Meier says raising a guide dog is a rewarding project for 4-H members: "They are doing something specifically for another person. What they have spent a year and a half on, if the dog passes its professional training, will benefit someone for about eight years or more."

**Changing Masters**

The dogs return to the San Rafael center when they are about 18 months old. They then receive five months of professional training in the specific skills needed by guide dogs. The 50 to 60 percent who pass the training are paired with selected blind recipients. The two train together for four weeks before leaving the school. The 4-H'er who raised the puppy is invited to the graduation ceremony, where he or she symbolically hands the dog's leash to the animal's blind new master. Guide Dogs for the Blind does not charge any fees to the people who receive the dogs. It is a non-profit corporation supported by donations.

St. Andre was handed Bob's leash by 4-H'er Anita Zick of Ramona, California. He and she have exchanged several tape-recorded letters since then. Many guide dog users form long-lasting friendships with the 4-H'ers who raised their dogs.



Right: Julie Wharton of Tucson encourages her guide dog pup to use stairs forbidden to other family dogs.
Left: Phoenix 4-H'er Lindy Anderson gets good behavior from Quebec, her guide dog trainee, at Grande's Villa Restaurant.

"Working with 4-H has really benefited our organization," says Paul Keesberry of Guide Dogs for the Blind. The 4-H pattern of one-year projects, the 4-H tradition of learning responsibility by caring for an animal, and the organized 4-H leadership all suit the needs for raising guide dogs.

"It's absolutely essential that the puppies are raised in a family atmosphere at this young age. . . .Socialization is the number one concern," says Keesberry.

The Arizona 4-H'ers in the guide dog project range from 11 to 18 years old, and vary in their amount of prior 4-H experience with dogs. Some, such as Julie Wharton of Tucson and Dianne Lasher of Phoenix, had raised and trained dogs as 4-H projects for several years before receiving their guide dog pups. Others, including Jeni and Tami Wofford, have had dogs only as family pets, not 4-H projects.

Keesberry or another representative from San Rafael delivers the puppies personally. They are three-month-old German shepherds, Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers.

**Training by 4-H'ers**

The 4-H families teach the puppies good behavior, starting with housebreaking and learning not to jump on people or furniture. The pups get used to the home environment and to other animals.

In 4-H families, the other animals may be numerous. When Kim Kallsen had had her guide dog pup, Abba, for two months, she said, "Abba has learned to get along with the sheep, but the sheep don't get along too well with her." Stacy Keesler's pup Allison liked to chase kittens, but just looked at the calf from a distance. Both Abba and Allison seemed to get along with St. Andre's tolerant Bob.

Julie Wharton had two problems with teaching her pup Aesop to climb stairs: It was scared to come back down, and seeing this newcomer on the staircase upset her family's other dogs because they are not allowed upstairs themselves.

The 4-H'ers are expected to introduce their pups to situations that might be distracting or frightening. As a guide dog, the animal will need to accompany its master anywhere without fear or hesitation.

The Woffords and their neighbor Becky Meyer took their guide dog pups often to Tower Plaza shopping center in Phoenix. Lindy and Mike Anderson, also of Phoenix, took their pup Quebec for a ride on Molly the Trolley around Scottsdale Center.

Kim Kallsen says, "The first time I took Abba to a store, she freaked out when the automatic door opened. She wouldn't go in. I had to carry her in."

Learning to contact business proprietors beforehand and explain the guide dog training program has taught the 4-H'ers some lessons in community relations and cooperation.

St. Andre and his guide dog Bob.

**Field Day Surprises**

Group activities have supplemented the 4-H'ers' individual work with their dogs. Donna Anderson, the adult leader for the guide dog project in Phoenix, organized a field day at Roadrunner Park last winter. The local guide dog raisers took their pups through an obstacle course that included nearby ducks and cats, a chainsaw noise, a metal grating to be walked over, a person abruptly opening an umbrella, another stepping suddenly out of a mock telephone booth as the dog passed, and other surprises.

Local leaders Jane Dalton in Cottonwood and Pat Wharton in Tucson are planning similar field days. Wharton also plans activities to tie the guide dog training closer to the rest of the 4-H dog project. She hopes to establish a guide dog class for county 4-H dog shows. A separate class is needed because the obedience commands and standards that guide dogs must learn are different from those used for dog shows.

After training and loving her pup Patrina for more than a year, Jeni Wofford was not looking forward this summer to returning the dog to San Rafael. "I'll feel sad when we have to send her back," she said. "That will be the hardest part."

The family that raises a dog can choose to keep it if the dog fails its guide dog training. But for most of the 4-H'ers who raise the pups, their lasting satisfaction is in knowing that their job well done has helped make life easier for a blind person.

"Getting around with a cane is very slow compared to traveling with a guide dog," says St. Andre, who has tried both. "And I don't know of any cane that can lead you right to a door."