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New Paltz man helps Puppies behind Bars train service dogs for disabled vets

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“Playing with eight four-week-old Lab puppies is the best volunteer job in the world,” says David De Mers of New Paltz. “I go every Tuesday morning. If I lived closer, I’d probably set up a cot and be there all the time.” De Mers is talking about his very tough assignment as an early socializer for animals bred to work as guide dogs through Guiding Eyes for the Blind. Founded in 1956 to assist and enrich the lives of blind and visually impaired individuals, the non-profit organization has become one of the premier guide-dog schools in the world.

Before dogs are fostered at out at 18 months old to people to be trained, they are socialized by early and intimate contact with lots of folks, who also expose them to a safe variety of stimuli. “I go to the center where the puppies are born and right into the kennels with their Moms to massage the babies,” says De Mers. “They get used to human touch from birth. You take them to a playroom to introduce them to various footings, tapes of sounds and climbing activities inside and outdoors.” Not a bad gig for anyone with a passion for dogs, but who might not be able to own one full-time.

And De Mers’ story gets even better. Through his commitment to Guiding Eyes, he heard about another program taking place at a local prison where dogs are assigned to prisoners, who become their caretakers and trainers 24/7 for the next 16 months. Puppies behind Bars (PBB) trains inmates to raise puppies to become service dogs for disabled veterans, and also as explosive-detection canines for law enforcement. The pups live in the cells with their primary raisers, go to classes administered by PBB once

a week and are furloughed every week to “puppy-sitters,” who take the dogs into their homes to expose them to things that they won’t experience in prison, like hearing doorbells or the sounds of a coffee-grinder, learning how to ride in a car and walk down a crowded sidewalk or anything else occurring in everyday life on the outside.

De Mers signed on to take dogs out of the prison scene and introduce them to the world at large. He describes how returning a dog to its prison caretaker is like returning a child to its worried parent after a brief-but-tense separation. “These dogs are like their children. We e-mail a report after every outing, saying how it went, or calling out problems for trainers to work on. Usually when you bring them back, there’s a minimal chance for contact with the prisoners. Technically, you’re not supposed to be communicating with them. But they can’t resist asking.”

This points to a remarkable benefit that the program has on everyone involved. The dog-breeders get quality attention for their puppies; the dogs are loved and cared for as individuals by one person full-time; and – perhaps the most phenomenal outcome of the arrangement – the prisoners experience responsibility, belonging to and contributing to the community and, on a personal level, an outpouring of unconditional affection for another being. It might be the very first time in their lives that they find it safe to open their hearts and unselfishly care for another.

PBB founder and president Gloria Gilbert Stoga writes, “The puppies have affected the lives not only of their puppy-raisers, but of virtually all the inmates and staff at the prison. It is literally impossible to walk a puppy around without being stopped by inmates who want to pet the dogs, or who want to just say ‘Hi’ to them, and I am constantly being approached by corrections officers and senior staff who ask me about the puppies’ training. One of our particularly sensitive pups goes to several different areas of the prison: The 16- and 17-year-old inmates play with her; domestic violence classes use her to get the women to open up and talk; and she even visits inmates who are about to go before the parole board, for it has been found that her presence has a calming effect on the women.”

In addition to basic obedience, manners and socialization, inmate puppy-raisers are responsible for teaching the pups at least 90 commands. Once they reach 18 months of age, they are tested to determine their suitability for formal training by PBB. When a puppy is matched with a disabled individual, final training continues specific to the client’s needs. Currently, over 40 service dogs are being raised in three of six participating prisons in New York and New Jersey.

De Mers talks about placing service dogs with men and women who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, suffering from severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other war-related maladies. Dog Tags: Service Dogs for Those Who’ve Served Us allows disabled veterans to return to meaningful lives through their very personal relationships with these dogs. At no cost to them, they are given dogs that will assist them in gaining greater independence, dignity and expanded horizons of opportunity. The program relies on volunteerism and financial contributions to continue raising and training dogs to accomplish this life-transforming task. According to De Mers, it’s a worthwhile effort.

Johan Arenas, a Marine Corps veteran who served in Iraq, recently drove with Stoga to the medium-security prison in Fishkill where his new service dog was “graduating” into his possession. He had been working with the dog for two weeks, learning all the commands to which it had been trained to respond and getting acquainted. “His name is Carbon,” he tells me, “named by the sponsor. He gets to come home with me today. We trained for two weeks, bonding and making sure the dog is right for me and I’m right for the dog. He has changed my life completely.”

Arenas, who lives in New York City, explains that since his return from Iraq, he has been isolated, locked in his own dungeon. “I go out now to play with Carbon. He’s making me get in touch with who I am and what I lost when I went away to war.” He says that his girlfriend tells him that she sees a big change in him since he has met Carbon. “I’m more relaxed and happy. That’s something she hasn’t seen in me.

Puppies behind Bars will retain ownership of the dog for five years, just to make sure it works out – but he's my dog.”

Guiding Eyes and Puppies behind Bars are not affiliated with each other. For more information about Puppies behind Bars, visit www.puppiesbehindbars.com, and for the Canine Development Center, go to www.guidingeyes.org/about-us/tour-our-campus/patterson-directions. You can also contact David P. De Mers at mardamers@aol.com.