



Trainers, dogs and students learn to know each other in the court yard of the Leader Dogs for the Blind school during the first week of instruction.

They flock from around world

Sightless find new sense of freedom

Students from around the world flock to a school in Avon Township so they can learn a new sense of freedom. It's not a class for young revolutionaries or new left politicians.

Leader Dogs for the Blind gives them this freedom by training them to use a new pair of eyes. Cooke, Andy, Dutchess, Bullet and Shane are more than 70 or 80 pounds of furry fun. They and 150 other dogs provide a vital service from this, the largest school of its kind in the world, south of Rochester on Rochester and Avon roads.

According to Harold Pocklington, executive director for the school, "Leader Dogs for the Blind provides the means of mobility so the blind men and women can resume their responsibility, so they can seek the same opportunities as any other citizen. The dog people school wants to put courageous people back on their feet with a leader dog."

"Historically, the problem of blindness has been dealt with on an emotional basis. Predominant attitudes of the public still vacillate between stifling sympathy and avoidance."

Ed Lange has been a trainer with the school for 27 years. He is in charge of eight dogs at a time, a three month period. Most of the dogs are German shepherds, labradors and golden retrievers. Some dogs come from the school's own breeding program but most are donated. If a dog isn't able for some reason to meet leader dog standards, it is returned or a new owner is found. Only 30 percent of those donated make it as leader dogs.

"SOME DOGS are afraid of traffic," Lange said. "Others won't go up stairs. Or some don't meet the medical examination. Here," he said, holding up an X-ray. "This dog has a

slight hip displacement. In five years, he might be off the street. We like our dogs to last on an average of eight years."

It costs the school approximately \$2,000 to train one leader dog team. The blind are charged nothing for the service. Even room and board at the school are free, in a college-style dormitory. Students eat together, play the guitar or braille-monopoly, and get to know one another.

And always the furry presence is there. Each dormitory bedroom has a wall hook and chain for the dog. The only place the dogs aren't allowed is in the hallways unsecured.

There isn't a single building the dogs aren't allowed in, said Kevin Shwark of Flint. Kevin received his dog, Bullet, only a week ago and the two were still getting used to each other and the streets of Rochester. "The only place you might have trouble in is a hospital. They say the dogs can carry germs in, and I guess that's justified."

Kevin will look for work when he goes back to Flint and said he may be getting married soon. Partially sighted but considered legally blind, Kevin said, "Bullet is just like a big baby. 70-pound baby. He's like me, he doesn't like stores. If I go in a store I'm out again in five minutes."

IN ROCHESTER, the dogs are a common sight. Lange said Rochester is almost the perfect location to begin the dogs' training because it offers all the facilities and hazards of a city without presenting students with too much too soon. After a minimum of two weeks the students and dogs move on to more crowded and trickier trainings such as Birmingham and Royal Oak.

Luis Pena came from Columbia, South America for his dog Dutchess.

"We get poor quality clothing in Colombia," Luis said, taking his dog into Mitzellfeld's department store on Main Street. So Luis began to shop for clothes while Dutchess lay rather bored at his side. Dutchess is a black labrador and sees a world most dogs don't, the inside of department stores, soda fountains, libraries and museums.

Trainer Steve Solvold likes his new job with the school, walking a dozen paces behind Kevin and Luis on a Rochester outing. He accompanies the two wherever they want to go.

When a blind person is presented with his or her dog, it is only after the trainer has matched dog with human

personality. Lange and other trainers agree that this is perhaps the most difficult part of the job. Some dogs and humans simply aren't compatible.

"DOGS HAVE individual personalities," Solvold said. "You can tell, for instance, if a dog was raised by a boy or a girl." Unlike trainers Lange and Scott Cischke, Solvold doesn't own any dogs himself, which has something to do with his apartment living. "Some dogs walk slow, some fast. Some respond better to a high voice."

The first day, owner and dog simply have an hour together to hash out their similarities and differences. The blind person feels the dog out, talks to it, and the dog considers what it would be like taking orders from this new authority. Sometimes things don't work out and another dog has to be found for that person.

Once, Cischke said, "I had to take a dog away from a person. It just wasn't working out between them and it was a dangerous situation. Taking that dog away was the hardest thing I've ever done. I never want to have to do that again."

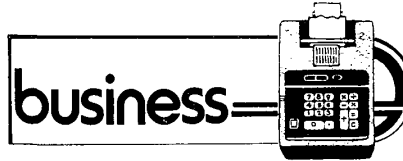
Leader Dogs houses approximately 150 dogs at a time, with on the average of one new dog a day. There is a 90-day waiting list for new students. The dogs eat a ton of food a month, dry meal purchased in 50-pound bags from a wholesaler in Ferndale. Before mating with a blind person, the dogs stay in separate pens in the school's kennel, sleeping on floors heated by burned copper tubing and hot water. Each dog is exercised for a half hour a day and allowed to play outside with other dogs.

SINCE ITS founding in 1939, 3,000 leader dogs have passed out the school's doors, and 2,909 blind have been given new sets of eyes, including

When it comes to picking out clothes, Luis Pena is on his own. Dutchess has rather peculiar tastes.



Kevin Shwark (left) and Luis Pena take Bullet and Dutchess everywhere, even the department store on Main Street.



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parade replacement. About half the blind come from Michigan, others from Alaska to Puerto Rico, from east coast to west, and also from India, Mexico, Canada, Spain, Israel and Denmark.

After a person meets a dog, the training begins. The trainers live in rooms adjoining the students. Trainers, students and dogs eat in the same room. Rather than putting a nervous student and apprehensive dog out on the street, the school has a small fenced-in park with simulated street crossings. But the worst a person could do there is bump into a tree.

On any day in Rochester, especially the warm, sunny ones, the leader dog fleet descends on Mitzellfeld's, the D&C variety store, the post office, the A&P supermarket. "Most of the people know us and why we're out here," said trainer Solvold. But a couple of times I almost got hit by cars. And I still get people trying to lead me across the street or telling me when it's safe to cross. But we have fun, too. Last Saturday we all went out to Stoney Creek park to play and walk around.

Leader Dog Week has been pro-

claimed by Avon Township and Rochester to honor and show off the school to a public not familiar with the service. The school operates through private and club contributions. Beginning April 16, the school will conduct tours of the dormitory, kennel, veterinary and training facilities. Tours will be held Saturday and Sunday, April 16, 17, 23 and 24, at 2 p.m. and 3 p.m.

The school's downtown Rochester facility on Walnut Boulevard, south of Fourth Street, will be open for public inspection from 2-4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, April 16, 17, 23 and 24.

A special move of a blind person meeting her new companion will be shown during the week at greater Rochester elementary schools. Demonstrations will take place at the following times in Winchester Mall: Avon and Rochester roads across from the leader dog school, and in Mendocott Village Mall, Walton Boulevard and Adams Road near Oakland University.

April 17, 2-4 p.m.; April 18-20, noon to 3 p.m.; April 21, 7-8:30 p.m.; April 23, 6-8:30 p.m.; April 23, noon to 3 p.m.; April 24, noon to 3 p.m.

Leader dogs: 'You get to love each of them'

Story and photos: ED BAS

"For whither thou goest" is the motto of the Leader Dogs for the Blind School's downtown Rochester extension. "For whither thou goest, I will go," completes the quotation. "And where thou lodges, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people."

If Andy could talk, I'm sure he'd agree. Instead, he'll just wag his tail and flash that toothy grin and go on leading the blind. Andy is a leader dog.

"It's tough on him," trainer Scott Cischke said. "Andy was brought up through our breeding program. We gave him away to a girl through a 4H club and she raised him for the first year. It was tough for her to let him



Trainer Scott Cischke said he often gets offers to help him and Andy cross the street, though neither needs it.

go. Then he came to us and now I'm raising him, but pretty soon I'll have to pass him on to someone who needs him more. The poor animal is saying, 'Wow, what's going on here?'

But it would be unlike Andy to complain. Like all leader dogs, the one thing these animals do is take things in stride. Literally. They take the blind in stride.

They take problems like erratic motorists and wet weather in stride. A leader dog's whole life after training is a kind of pride in its stride.

ANDY IS IN his third month of training. He began his stay at the leader dog school in a quarantine pen, a rather stark but short period of confinement before his appearance before the veterinarian. Andy was then assigned as one of eight dogs farmed out to Cischke.

"You get to love each one of them, and it's hard sometimes to end the training," Cischke said.

Andy is a golden retriever, a good dog according to Cischke but a little more easily distracted than some of the other breeds. Still, he is alert and spirited and seems to like the streets. Some of the dogs seem like they'd rather be off romping in a park without a leash, and their heads are always turning to see what is behind or to the side of them. But Andy is dignified and businesslike.

"Find the door," is the first command to get out of the building, the leader dog school's Rochester extension on Walnut Boulevard. Dogs can maintain a vocabulary of approx-

imately 2,000 words, and Andy goes directly to the door rather than simply stumbling around for a way to exit the building. Contrary to popular opinion, a leader dog does not tell a blind person where to walk. The person must decide where to go and how to get there, and the dog will then merely guide. Dogs do not read traffic signals either, since they are color blind, but cross a street when the master tells him to. To do this, the blind person must listen carefully for the flow of traffic.

SOME DOGS are skittish in traffic. Others shy away from other dogs or stairs. A few even have problems with the big golden lion outside the leader dog school, a symbol of the Lions club that donate most of the school's operating money.

"Left, right, straight," and Andy is off and striding. Curb presents a regular challenge that become part of the routine. Andy stops, looks down at the curb and waits for his companion to tap the curb with his or her foot. "Find the curb" is another command used sometimes when an obstacle presents itself and the animal stops several feet in front of the curb.

"Good dog, good boy," Cischke says, with a pat on the neck. Andy responds phenomenally to the slightest change in tone. "No," lowers his tail and ears momentarily, but Andy never sulks. Every new curb or crack in the sidewalk is a new experience, a new piece to the puzzle he must learn. Someone has left a car halfway in a

driveway and half out on the street. Andy doesn't merely circle around it, because that wouldn't tell the blind person anything. Instead, he stops and waits for an extended hand to tap the car. "Good boy, good dog," and Andy makes a 90-degree turn to march around the car.

On Walnut, a car lurches from the

drive-in window. Andy doesn't flinch, pull away or speed up. He takes a half-step backwards and stops. Cischke, working without a blindfold, sees the car stop and says, "Andy, forward. Good dog, good boy, Andy."

Another leader dog is well on his way, a natural in this case. Royal

Oak and Birmingham should be a cinch. A clean bill of health, a friendly disposition, and some person with out sight is going to get a pair of eyes.

Elevators, revolving doors, "men working" signs and open marbles shouldn't be a problem. Andy will take them all in stride.



A golden lion stands guard outside the doors of the Leader Dogs administration building, a gift from the Lions club.