

Leader Dog training County man to lead Virtual University

is a family affair for Oakland couple

They are, as they say, "not yet ready for prime time" — but the puppies who find their ways in and out of Carol Thompson's home are adorable, anyway. And, while they may be feisty, they have promising futures ahead.

Someday, they will be ready. They'll be fully-trained working dogs, well-loved and priceless to their blind owners.

"I guess when I was little, I always wanted a puppy and I couldn't have one," remembers Thompson, of Independence Township, as she explains how she got involved with taking in puppies who have not yet been officially trained as guide dogs from Leader Dogs for the Blind, Inc.

"Sometimes when I pray, I thank God that I love puppies."

Thompson and her husband, Tom, along with their four now-grown children, have taken 15 puppies into their home over a 13-year period.

Rambunctious pup

Their most recent addition is a fluffy, rambunctious, as-yet unnamed golden retriever pup, who will spend between 12 and 16 months with the family before being returned to the Rochester-based organization for serious guide-dog training and eventual placement with a blind person.

The unnamed pup is fearless and reckless, as he romps with Tucker, the year-old Labrador retriever the Thompsons expect to soon return to Leader Dogs.

Sometimes, like this summer, the Thompsons have puppies coming and going.

Thompson says the organization has graduated 13,000 dogs since its inception in 1939. Dogs that do not graduate, whether because of birth defects, shyness, aggressiveness or the like, are adopted out to non-blind families

from a waiting list.

"We mostly socialize them," Thompson says of her charges. "We name the pups and they keep the name at least through the training, and then it's up to the blind person if they want to keep the name."

According to Thompson and her eldest son, Jeremy, they, and other host families, are responsible for introducing their puppies into the real world of vacuum cleaners, lawn mowers, elevators, umbrellas and stores, so they will not be afraid of these types of noisy items and places when they are placed with blind owners.

They also teach the puppies basic commands such as "sit" and "stay" — though they do not provide official guide-dog training.

Going to church

In the Thompsons' case, they also take the puppies to the family church, the Waterford Church of Christ.

"We take them to church. Everybody's always really receptive," says Thompson.

The Thompsons heard of the puppy-raising program through a teaching friend of Tom's.

Returning the dogs to the organization after bonding with them was hard at first, Thompson recalls.

But letting go of her charges became an easier task over the years, as she came to realize that someday the puppies would be helping others, Thompson says. And Jeremy agrees.

"I think over all, I liked it," he says of the cycle of caring for and releasing puppies. "There were some dogs that I didn't like to see go back. Some would get closer. It's never been too hard to give up a dog because you know what they're going to do. It's very rewarding."

Sitting on the front porch of his Independence Township home, David Spencer, Ph.D., looks nothing if not relaxed. He has discarded his suit jacket, eaten his dinner and is now comfortable in a summer chair.

Watching children ride bikes in front of his house, he leans back and considers cyberspace — and all the potential that subject holds.

Then, with a little prodding, the seven-year president of Walsh College — who will soon be leaving that position to head up Michigan Virtual University (MVU) — owns up to the fact that he likes to collect antique fountain pens.

"I like to say, 'you can never have enough fountain pens,'" he says, smiling at the obvious disparity between the pens of the past and the computers of the future. "I'm told I'm sort of a living oxymoron."

Spencer expects to leave the helm of Walsh College sometime in October and begin chasing the new adventure of overseeing MVU — a concept whose time, he says, has come.

Michigan Virtual University

is, according to Spencer, "a brokerage to provide Michigan colleges and universities with an opportunity to deliver their distance education programs to Michigan businesses and their employees."

What it means, in short, he says, is that students of all ages will be able to educate themselves through the use of distance, video conferencing, satellites and other multi-media forms.

The first phase of MVU was established 18 months ago in Ann Arbor to provide distance education for auto workers. That phase was called Michigan Virtual Automotive Education and it was founded in cooperation with the president of Michigan State University, the president emeritus of the University of Michigan and CEOs from Chrysler, General Motors and Ford Motor Co.

The second phase of Michigan Virtual University will be considered the automotive's derivative.

The costs for distance learning through MVU will be on a par with current college and univer-

sity expenses, Spencer says, and will provide associate, bachelors and masters degree programs.

Michigan Virtual University will specialize in business and industry programs that include plastics, furniture, information technology, tourism, education, accounting, banking and health care.

The 48-year-old Spencer, a former public school administrator and teacher of elementary and college classes, says learning opportunities through MVU will be available for the 1998-99 school year.

Interested students can obtain application information by accessing the school's web site at: www.mvac.org.

Spencer — who has held a variety of board positions for organizations as diverse as the Cranbrook Institute of Arts, the editorial advisory board of WJBK TV-2 and the Henry Ford Health System-Northeast region — says he chose to resign from Walsh College because, "this is an exciting opportunity. And I believe in the vision that Gov. John Engler and the Michigan jobs commission developed."

"This project is really an opportunity to focus ... on workforce development through advances in distance learning," he says.

"There are very critical demands on busy professionals. Distance learning can provide more flexibility and more timely education access opportunities."

Spencer, a married father of two sons, says his goal for MVU is to reduce the lag time between workforce needs and available, informed, educated employees.

He says there is a great need for employees with varying levels of technological ability.

"By providing more timely and flexible distance learning, we can reduce the gap," he says.

"Educational opportunities today for every age group, from preschoolers to our retired, are boundless. The key for the future success will be to harness the vast resources that are available through information technology and make them available to both the teachers and the learners in a way that will promote creativity and excitement, so that it's rewarding for everyone involved."

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