

Finding a furry friend and fresh confidence

By ED BAS



Thursday, April 20, 1978

Cookie, Andy, Duchess and Bullet have been pounding the streets since their graduation last year from one of the most exclusive canine academies anywhere.

The furry streetwalkers are the eyes and source of freedom for the blind, and were trained at the Leader Dogs for the Blind School.

Since 1939, nearly 5,000 dogs and 3,000 students have come out of the school with a new knack for coping with a sightless world.

This year the school will operate with a budget of \$1.35 million, \$800,000 of that coming from Michigan and out-state Lions Clubs. The United Way donates between \$60,000 and \$100,000, and \$150,000 comes from endowment fund interest.

About half the money is used to pay salaries and wages of the Avon Township-based school's 50 employees, including 17 trainers. The dogs, 140 at a time, chow down on dry dog food with a tab of \$18,000 per year.

MOST OF the dogs weigh between 80 and 100 pounds. Constant exercise gives them a healthy appetite. They are kept in one huge kennel until selected for individual students. From that time on, the dog and student are never apart. They live together in dormitory-style rooms on the school grounds.

The newest addition to the school's staff is trainer-interpreter Carlos Gallusser. A Michigan resident since 1966, Gallusser arrived here from Mexico where he lived for 11 years. He happened on the job during a visit to his bank at Avon and Rochester roads.

"I just saw the sign and decided to find out what they did," he said. "It's good work, great exercise. I walk a one-mile course three or four times in the morning, then we repeat it in the afternoon. After that, the students come back and are usually pretty tucked out."

HAROLD POCKLINGTON, director of the Leader Dogs school, said: "We were really glad to have Carlos come along. Many of our students are from Spain and speak no English. A bilingual trainer really helps."

Students come to the school from around the world. Ten students last month returned to their homes in Denmark. Another group of 10 is due next month. Another group is from Mexico and Spain.

Of the latest crew of students, ages range from 20 to 60. They came from all walks of life — homemakers to musicians, assembly worker, piano tuner and physiotherapist.

The school raises half of its dogs and

buys half, but is always receptive to donations. It also farms out dogs to children to raise through the state's 4-H programs. Only 30 per cent of the dogs make it as Leader Dogs. Some don't make it because they are too vicious. Others are too shy, unhealthy, or afraid of traffic or stairways. Some even have hang-ups about the golden lion statues that adorn the Leader Dog offices.

The ones that make it are special. Of the school's more famous dogs is Liberty, donated by ex-President Gerald Ford. Warren Pierce, a local radio personality, also donated a dog who is now in training. The dog's progress is reported by Pierce on his radio show.

IT COSTS about \$4,250 to train each Leader Dog team, but students are not charged. The school has its own park-like runway complete with curbs and sidewalks, has a new \$20,000 pavilion for wet-weather training and a \$70,000 office addition.

The school is run like any other big business concern. There is vehicle maintenance, veterinarian bills and public relations to tend to.

"Historically, the problem of blindness has been dealt with on an emotional basis. Predominate attitudes of the public still vacillate between stifling sympathy and avoidance. Even the most sophisticated of our fellow citizens frequently assumes that blindness is synonymous with dependence," according to an endowment fund report for the school.

Equating business with blindness is just one of the many jobs taken on by the school.



"This fellow all of a sudden had a lifetime friend who didn't care what he looked like"—Harold Pocklington.



Jean Bennett (left) and Oliver join Jose Parades and Niki on a downtown Rochester walk.

Four-legged street walkers light up a world of darkness

By SUSAN TAUBER KLEIN

It's lunch time. The blue dining room is filled with people chatting with their friends between bites of hot turkey sandwiches and sips of milk or coffee.

The only thing that distinguishes this room from others is that almost each person at the round tables has a dog lying next to his chair.

These people are more than just dog lovers. They are students at Leader Dogs for the Blind School. The dogs are their new, constant companions, specially trained to help blind people lead easier lives.

Leader Dogs for the Blind School in Avon Township is filled with students year round. They come for a month of six-day-a-week training sessions and leave with a furry friend and newly found confidence.

The Lions Club-sponsored school gives away 250 retrained dogs a year to students. Although each dog is trained at a cost of \$4,250, there is no charge to the students for attending the school and receiving a dog. German shep-

herds, black Labradors and golden retrievers make up the bulk of the leader dogs.

THE 24 STUDENTS at the March 19 to April 13 session studied under trainers Dan McDonald, Art Fleming, Jim Henderson and Carlos Gallusser. Together, they worked at forming a partnership with the dogs that will last for many years.

Edgar Brueggeman came to Leader Dogs for the Blind School after much consideration from Hartland, Wis., a suburb of Milwaukee. Blind for three years, Brueggeman said he came because he was dependent on other people to help him get around.

"My wife isn't always able to walk with me. I was sitting around, relying on my neighbors to get me out of the house."

"Now, with Mocher, I'll be more mobile," said Brueggeman. Mocher is a soft-eyed shepherd. She totally relaxes under Brueggeman's touch.

Brueggeman was looking forward to taking Mocher home.

"I'm going to have to get her acquainted with my wife. I'll have to spread by affections for my two ladies both ways," he said, smiling.

"My wife is getting Mocher her own mattress and putting it next to our bed."

There's more to attending the school than just adjusting to having a furry companion.

The students have to learn how to control their dogs when something like a squirrel distracts them, how to groom them, feed them, when to let them relieve themselves and how to give commands.

"THEY AREN'T giving commands really. They are asking the dog if it's okay to go forward at that time," said trainer McDonald.

Life at the dorm also includes many pleasures. The boarders have a chance to relax at night, after working during the day and listening to lectures at night. There are games such as Scrabble, cards and shuffle board to play.

Some students may play the piano, others may listen to the stereo or turn on the television. There's a house mother and two trainers on duty all the time to assist the students.

To become a student at the special school, an applicant must first send in an application and a medical form. "The student must be physically able to take the training," said Harold Pocklington, director of the 38-year-old school. "If they've got the ambition and desire for a dog and we think there's some chance they'll succeed, then we take the person."

They must be out of high school and can be as old as 70.

People from all over the world and in many professions have attended the internationally known school. In the last class, there were eight Spanish-speaking people. Recently, there were 10 people from Denmark. Ten more are scheduled for a future class.

WHEN A GROUP that speaks another language comes to the school, it must bring its own interpreter. Then the students are trained through their interpreter, who gets instructions from the trainer.

Gallusser speaks fluent Spanish and is serving double duty as interpreter and trainer.

One of his students was Antoni Barnes Pujol, a physiotherapist from Barcelona, Spain. Sitting on the blue bedspread on his dorm room bed, Pujol said he came to the von Township school because there isn't one like it in Spain and because he saw good results friends had.

He was matched with Major, a large, long-haired black shepherd. He is Pujol's first dog.

"He's very beautiful," Pujol said through Gallusser. "He's the same as any person to me. I can let him go for a minute and he'll come right back to me."

One of the most emotional times for the students is when they first meet their dogs. After the trainers spend time with each new student, they match each with dogs they have personally trained for four months. The trainers bring the dog into the student's room and watch as each tries to become acquainted with the other.

"I had quite a reaction when I first met Mocher," said Brueggeman. "She shook hands with me right away."

POCKLINGTON has several stories about this first introduction. One of his favorites is about a Vietnam veteran who lost most of his face in the war. Though his eyes and nose had been rebuilt, he wore a surgical mask all the time. He talked only with gurgling sounds.

"When this fellow met his dog, he had nothing but happiness," said Pocklington. "This fellow all of a sudden had a lifetime friend who didn't care what he looked like."

After the four weeks of training are over, there are no formal graduation ceremonies.

"They're so excited, so anxious to get home. We try to make everything as informal as possible," Pocklington said.

No degree is needed—just having a dog doing its work for its master is as good as any degree hanging on the wall.



A moment's respite at doorway (above) and bedside (right). Wherever the place, student-leader dog teams share special relationships. After successful pairings, leader dogs usually stay with their new masters eight to 10 years, the rest of the dogs' lives. One of the keys to success is teaming blind persons with dogs of similar temperaments.



Edgar Brueggeman and Mocher in the school lunchroom. "My wife is getting Mocher, her own mattress and putting it next to our bed," Brueggeman says.

Staff photos by Doug Bauman