Ensuring Healthy Guide Dogs for The Seeing Eye

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By Nancy West

When Dolores M. Holle, V’81, decided at age 10 that she wanted to become a veterinarian, she never imagined that she would one day be in charge of canine health for more than 500 dogs and puppies each month at The Seeing Eye in Morristown, New Jersey. That’s how many canines are in various stages of breeding, screening, and training at this venerable institution on any given day.

Looking back, Dr. Holle recognizes that her work at The Seeing Eye seemed “meant to be” long before she came on board as its first full-time attending veterinarian and founding director of canine health management in 1991. “Having grown up in New Jersey, I was always aware of The Seeing Eye,” she says. While attending the College of Saint Elizabeth near the organization’s Morristown headquarters, she chose The Seeing Eye as the subject of an independent study project.

Then, while a veterinary student at Penn, she adopted a Seeing Eye puppy that had been eliminated from the program due to an orthopedic problem. “He was brought into radiology at Penn and Dr. Darryl Biery [emeritus professor of radiological sciences], who continues to be The Seeing Eye’s radiologist, helped me arrange the adoption. Devon was the quintessential dog—a black Labrador retriever—that one dog that stands out in a person’s life.”

“Our dogs were useful in helping Dr. Aguirre hunt for the gene for PRA. He developed a marker blood test that has enabled us to work around the disease and eliminate the risk of creating any additional dogs that will be affected.”

After working in private practice and emergency medicine for a number of years, Dr. Holle seized an opportunity to join The Seeing Eye. She established and directs the 37-member department of canine health management where her responsibilities include reproduction services, pediatrics, early puppy socialization, guidelines, and oversight of 900 puppies placed with families, overall health care of dogs on campus, and guidelines and consultation services for 1,800 dogs in field service.

“I truly feel that I have one of the finest jobs in veterinary medicine,” she says. “Here, we provide healthy dogs for use as guides in a relationship that epitomizes the human animal bond. We see miracles happen every month as new students come here to bond with their dogs.”

“The dogs change people’s lives in so many ways,” she adds, “just by providing the freedom to go out in the world and explore without depending on another person. As exhausted as we might be at the end of the day, seeing that happen just carries us forward.”

Although guide dogs are intelligent, wonderful animals, they are still dogs, notes Dr. Holle. “They can be rascals when we’re trying to do their physical exams or take blood samples,” she notes. “Then they put on that harness and go to work. To see that transformation is phenomenal.”

During her 14-year tenure at The Seeing Eye, Dr. Holle has played a major role in the organization’s growth, expanding her staff from one to four full-time clinical veterinarians and 18 canine health technicians who provide an extensive preventive health care program, conduct physical exams, and consult with the veterinarians of Seeing Eye puppy raisers and graduates.

“We are the first facility outside Penn to be certified for the PennHIP® radiographic procedure and to employ the technology.”

Dr. Holle also played a key role in the design and construction of three major building projects—a training facility and a canine health center, both over 40,000 square feet, and a 60,000-square-foot breeding station for German shepherds, Labrador retrievers, and golden retrievers.

The Vincent A. Stabile Canine Health Center, which is accredited by the American Animal Hospital Association, features a state-of-the-art clinic equipped to provide ultrasonography, endoscopy, and bronchoscopy. “We are the
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first facility outside Penn to be certified for
the PennHIP® radiographic procedure and to
employ the technology,” notes Dr. Holle. “In
addition, ours is one of the few veterinary facili-
ties that conducts electroretinography (ERG)
screening for progressive retinal atrophy (PRA),
a genetic condition common in the general
population of Labrador retrievers.”

Dr. Holle and her staff teamed with
Gustavo D. Aguirre, V’69, Ph.D., professor of
medical genetics and ophthalmology at Penn
Veterinary School, to wage a highly successful
battle against PRA, a disease that ultimately leads
to blindness. “We first found PRA in one of our
breeding stock in 1993,” Dr. Holle explains. “Our
dogs were useful in helping Dr. Aguirre hunt
for the gene for PRA. He developed a marker
test that has enabled us to work around
any additional dogs that will be affected. Today
we rarely even have carriers! I’m very proud of
the way The Seeing Eye collaborated with Penn
to defeat this problem and that we continue
to support and participate in other important
research efforts.”

Dr. Holle also takes pride in the state-of-the-
art breeding station she helped to design, as well
as the extraordinary 95 percent whelping rate
which yields the 85 to 90 litters born each year.
“We’ve finely tuned our ovulation timing and we
have a fabulously healthy breeding colony,” she
reports.

Dr. Holle believes that the design of the
breeding station contributes to the health of the
dogs. Pavilions arranged in octagons enable the
dogs to see each other and get a sense of the pack
without being crowded. Overhead skylights and
windows lining the perimeter create a light, airy,
and expansive facility that reduces stress in the
dogs.

“Our breeder dogs live fantastic lives here,”
says Dr. Holle. “They participate in an enrich-
ment program designed to enhance their lives
by providing them with mental and physical
stimulation through obedience exercises, agility
and games. Our puppies take daily jaunts to the
puppy playroom where they play on wobble
boards, climb over crates, go up and down
sliding boards, play ball and listen to CDs with
sounds to prepare them for the outside world.”

Dr. Holle also interacts with the students who
come through The Seeing Eye training program,
meeting with each monthly class. “Our gradu-
ates are the most astute dog owners I have ever
met,” she observes. “They are much more closely
involved with their dogs than the average owner
and, therefore, they recognize more quickly
when the dog has a problem that needs atten-
tion. We are proud that the work we do helps
them to achieve greater independence, dignity
and self-confidence in their lives.”

Bark This Way: Canine Partners for Life Offers Service Dogs for People with Disabilities

By Alan Atchison

On April 7, 2005, veterinary students crowded
into the basement of the Matthew J. Ryan
Veterinary Hospital to hear a presentation by
the founder of Canine Partners for Life (CPL), a
nonprofit organization located in Cochranville,
Pa., that trains and provides service dogs for
people with disabilities. The talk, sponsored
by Nestlé Purina, was led by CPL founder and
executive director, Darlene Sullivan. Also in
attendance from CPL were board member
Irving Gerber and Jennifer Kriesel, director of
development. Along with the CPL staff were
Nelson (Sullivan’s personal service dog), Myers
(a 10-month old yellow Labrador retriever in
training) and Alex (a retired service dog, cur-
rently doing demonstrations).

Service dogs are trained to assist people
with mobility impairment and those who have
difficulty using their hands to perform tasks.
According to Sullivan, service dogs allow people
with disabilities to experience a greater sense of
independence and dignity by not having to rely
on others to perform everyday tasks.

Service dogs are brought to CPL from a
variety of sources, most commonly from breed-
ers, kennels, and shelters. Most are pure-bred
black and yellow Labrador retrievers, brought
in as puppies. The puppies are evaluated in
volunteer homes for one year, to gather informa-
tion regarding behavior and personality traits.
Sullivan stressed that all School students are
eligible for first-year volunteer puppy homing.
“A center city college campus such as Penn
offers dogs a wonderful environment for diverse
exposure because service dogs in training can go
anywhere you go, including your classes,” she
said.

“The relationship between people and their service dogs is
very different than the bond one would have with
a pet,” said Sullivan. Service
dogs and their owners are
inseparable, depending on
each other for physical and
emotional support. “Can you
think of anything in your life,
other than your cell phone,
that you spend 24 hours
day with?” she said. “My
relationship with Nelson is
mind-boggling!”

CPL’s positive relationships
with veterinarians are crucial
to the success of the service
dog program. “It is important
for veterinarians to familiar-
ize themselves with service
dog programs so that when the dogs need to
be treated, the correct approaches can be taken
to ensure optimum care for the dog and owner,
making the job easier for the veterinarian,” she
said.

For more information, see the Canine