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Ensuring Healthy Guide Dogs for The Seeing Eye

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Ensuring Healthy Guide Dogs for The Seeing Eye

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



Dolores M. Holle, V’81

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 facilities 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 blood test that has enabled us to work around the disease and eliminate the risk of creating 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 enrichment 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 graduates 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 attention. 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, currently 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 breeders, 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 information 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 a 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 familiarize 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 Partners for Life website at <www.k94life.org>.



Students watch as “Nelson” retrieves keys.

Photo by Jim Graham