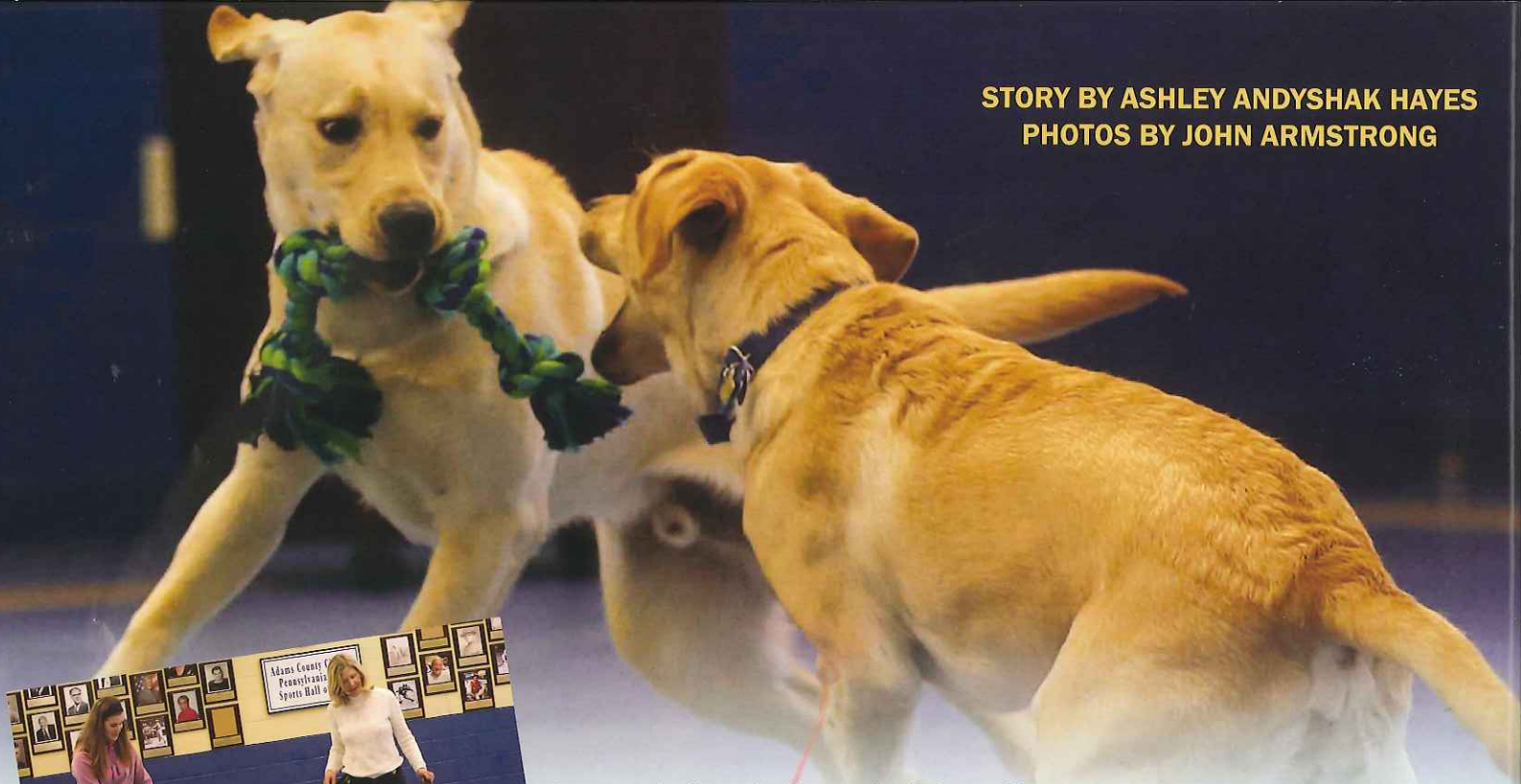




Guiding Eyes

**NEED BIG, PATIENT
HEARTS**

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Anyone who has a dog knows the feelings of love and companionship that define the pet/owner relationship.

But those who raise a guide dog enjoy a double benefit: they have the opportunity to build a relationship with a pup while training it to help someone with vision loss, autism, multiple sclerosis, or muscular dystrophy achieve greater independence. Gettysburg resident Anne Gallon is a volunteer puppy raiser with Guiding Eyes for the Blind, a New York-based organization that trains and places guide dogs with people who have vision loss or other physical or neurological challenges.

Visitors to Dale Gallon Historical Art on Steinwehr Avenue in Gettysburg will surely notice the Labrador Retriever pup resting behind the counter. His name is George, and he has been Gallon's constant companion for the past several months.

Raising a guide dog puppy had been on Gallon's "bucket list," she said, and when her schedule allowed her the time to dedicate to it, she took the plunge. She researched several organizations that breed guide dogs, and settled on Guiding Eyes for the Blind for its excellent ongoing support, including weekly meetings of area puppy raisers in Frederick, Md.

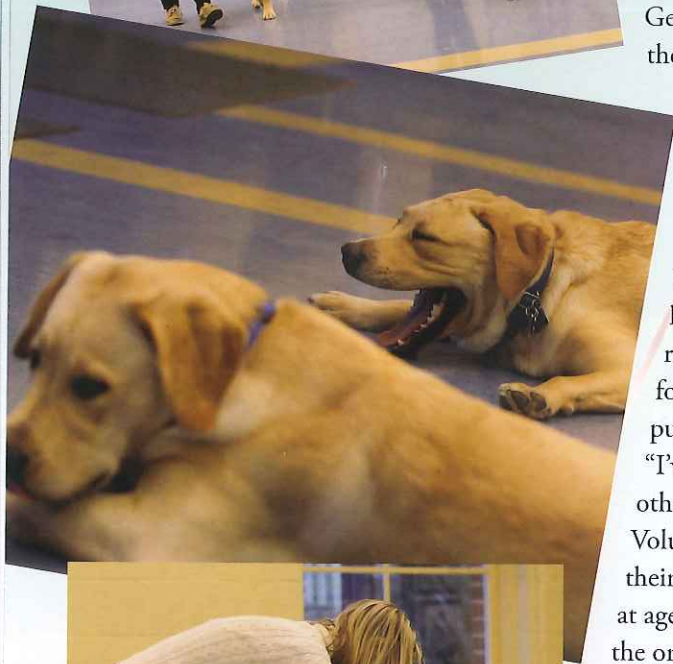
"I've always wanted to do it," she said. "Guiding Eyes gave a lot more support (than other organizations)."

Volunteer puppy raisers for Guiding Eyes have the opportunity to "sit" for a pup to get their feet wet prior to making a 12-16-month commitment. Raisers receive their pups at age 8 weeks, and are tasked with teaching basic obedience and house manners using the organization's Successive Training and Enrichment Program (STEP) method. This system uses positive reinforcement to produce confident, focused dogs, and Gallon said this approach to training was another factor that led her to choose a Guiding Eyes pup. "It's a relationship-based training, and I liked that," she said.

Guiding Eyes covers all veterinary expenses, and provides a crate and collar for the pup. Puppy raisers are also tasked with socializing their dogs, allowing them to experience many different environments, sounds, smells, and situations.

"I try to expose him to as many things as I can," Gallon said, including walks through downtown Gettysburg and regular interactions with visitors to the gallery. During Gettysburg's busy tourist season, George will have plenty of opportunity to practice sitting quietly as visitors browse her husband's historical artwork, she said.

Guiding Eyes pups must learn self-control; Gallon recalled one training session when she spelled out George's name in kibble in front of him, and the pup sat without nibbling the





treats while Gallon took a photo.

The pups also learn to tolerate wearing jackets and socks (George has both Hello Kitty and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles socks, Gallon says) to emulate the feeling of their future guide dog vests.

Raising a pup has its physical benefits for the trainers as well; Gallon said she lost 5 pounds during her first week walking with, and chasing after, George. During an interview in early January, after several months of working with George, Gallon said the physical demands of puppy raising had diminished.

"It's not so much taxing anymore," she said. "I think we both mellowed out."

Each Monday and Friday, Gallon has a reserved time at the Gettysburg Rec Park's dog park to exercise George. There she meets Nadia Chilcoat, a 17-year-old senior at Littlestown High School, who is raising her second Guiding Eyes pup, a yellow Lab named Edison.

"I enjoy the sense of accomplishment and love watching the dogs progress," Chilcoat said. "The only struggle is saying goodbye, but knowing the dog will become someone else's companion shines through the heartache."

Gallon shares this sentiment, and said it will be difficult to relinquish George when his training period is over. When George returns to Guiding Eyes, he will undergo four to six months of formal training, learning how to safely guide a person with vision loss or another challenge, or to support a child with autism. Some Guiding Eyes pups eventually become detection or police dogs or perform some other type of service. Dogs who do not successfully complete their formal training are released from the program to loving homes as pets. Chilcoat said her first Guiding Eyes pup, Flint, was released from the training program because he developed hip dysplasia.

However, Guiding Eyes allows puppy raisers to stay in contact with whomever their dog is eventually placed with; Gallon said this is another reason she chose to work with Guiding Eyes over other similar organizations.

"The relationship that I have with this dog is incredible," Gallon said. "When he leaves, I'll be heartbroken, but it's for a good reason. It's one of the best things I've ever done. It's very satisfying."

About GUIDING EYES FOR THE BLIND

Guiding Eyes for the Blind, based in Yorktown Heights, N.Y., was founded in 1954 by Donald Kauth.

The organization places dogs (92 percent Labrador Retrievers, 8 percent German Shepherds) with people with vision loss and other physical and neurological challenges, as well as children with autism. Each dog costs approximately \$50,000 to breed, raise, train, and support, but dogs and services are provided at no charge to those who need them. More information can be found online at guidingeyes.org.

