



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHY MURRAY

German Shepherd Seeing-Eye dog Becca pilots her owner Kathy Murray.





# The Seeing Eye

A behind-the-scenes look at this guide-dog training and breeding facility.

BY MEREDITH WARGO

**K**athy Murray of Rockaway, N.J., was 25 years old when she was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease that frequently results in blindness. Murray was just a few months away from her wedding day when she learned she only had about 10 years of vision left. "It was one of those days when everything in your life changes," she says.

As Murray's eyesight diminished, she learned how to use cane travel, which she didn't enjoy. (Cane travel refers to the white cane that visually impaired or blind people use as a guide for independent mobility.) "Because I lost my vision after

having been sighted for many years, I felt very self-conscious with the cane," Murray says. "I also had tunnel vision for a while so I could see people staring at me. One of the best decisions I made was to contact The Seeing Eye."

### **An indispensable service**

Founded in 1929, The Seeing Eye is the oldest existing guide-dog school in the world. Each month, as many as 24 "students" (blind or vision-impaired people) of all ages arrive from across the United States and Canada to pair up and train with a guide dog at the facility's campus in Morristown, N.J.



What's not commonly known about the nonprofit organization is that it also operates a state-of-the-art breeding facility, which is the backbone of The Seeing Eye's mission to breed well-rounded, calm and confident dogs. At approximately 2 years old, the best Seeing Eye dogs don't go into service with a blind person. Instead, they make their way to the Breeding Station where dogs are carefully matched to produce new generations of Seeing Eye puppies.

Located on 330 acres in nearby Chester, N.J., the Breeding Station houses approximately 60 dogs (12 males and 45 to 48 females). The Seeing Eye breeds German Shepherd Dogs, Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers and Lab-Golden crosses. "Our students need very stable dogs that are not bothered by the chaotic environment in which we live," says Peggy Gibbon, director of canine development at The Seeing Eye. "These breeds have been the most successful for us. We are still one of the few guide dog schools using a large number of German Shepherds."

All of the major guide-dog programs in the country use breeding programs to ensure consistent temperament and traits, and because certain dogs are successful in training. The Seeing Eye's breeding program began in 1942. With an estimated cost of \$65,000 per dog (which includes the costs of breeding, raising and training the dog, as well as teaching the student who will eventually use the dog), it's easy to see why it's vital to start with excellent dogs and ensure successful training.

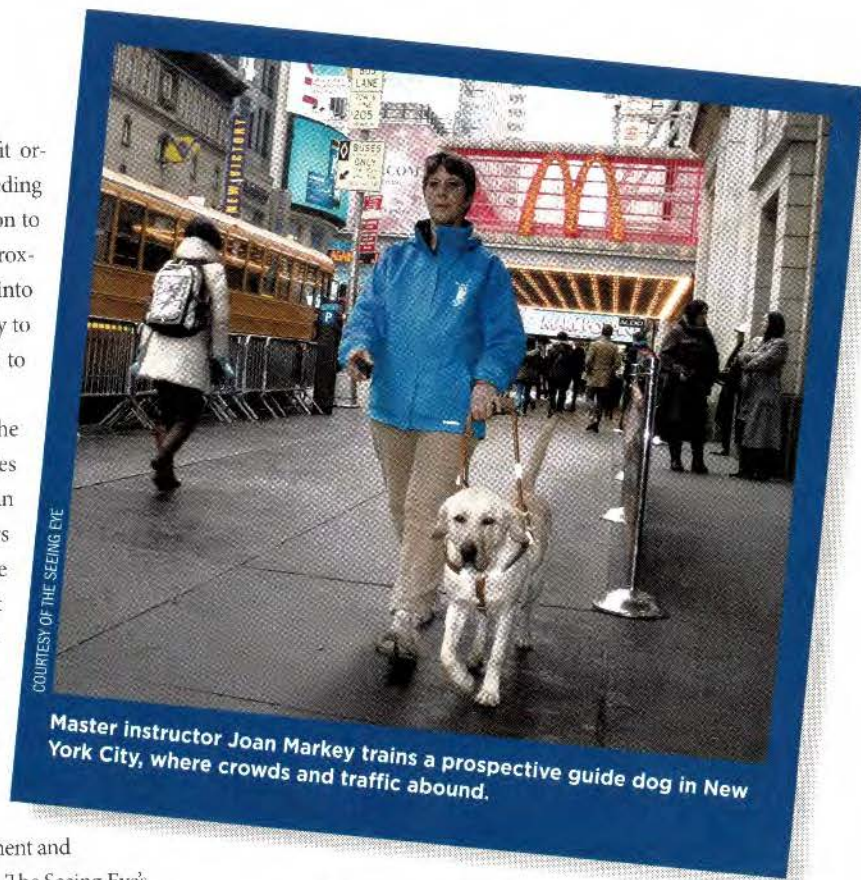
The Seeing Eye employs a full-time geneticist who oversees the selection of the breeding stock. Every dog is assigned an estimated breeding value based on the animal's health, temperament, family history, breed and size. (Estimated breeding values were originally used for breeding livestock. The Seeing Eye was one of the first groups to use the system for dog breeding.) "Breeding values give us an idea as to which of the young dogs may have the best potential to produce the best qualities," Gibbon says.

## Life at the Breeding Station

On average, 500 puppies are born at the Breeding Station annually. Each litter of puppies is assigned a letter in the alphabet and each puppy in that litter has a name starting with that letter.

Puppies live with their mother and littermates until weaning at about 5 weeks old, and then remain at the Breeding Station with their littermates until they are 7 weeks of age.

During the first seven weeks, 15 staff members and 45 to 50 volunteers expose the puppies to a multitude of sights, sounds and surfaces to prepare them for their future as guide dogs. An indoor playroom is equipped with stairs, a grate and other surfaces commonly encountered in everyday life. Employees often wear oversized hats, glasses and colorful clothing to familiarize the puppies to people of all shapes and sizes. CDs play recordings of thunderstorms and babies crying, and vacuum cleaners are used daily to acclimate the puppies to various sounds.



Master instructor Joan Markey trains a prospective guide dog in New York City, where crowds and traffic abound.

The adult breeders get their share of attention as well. The staff looks for ways to keep them busy and happy while at the Breeding Station. "These are working dogs who like to do things," Gibbon says. "They need to stay stimulated."

Staff members challenge the breeding dogs with The Seeing Eye Canine Excellence Challenge, which is compared to the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen test with an added twist. "These tests challenge the dogs mentally and physically and enable them to develop good manners that will help them when they retire from breeding," Gibbon says.

One of the challenges involves placing a freshly cooked hamburger on the seat of a chair. The handler walks the dog on a loose leash around the chair. He can talk to the dog but he can't pull the dog away. The handler puts the dog in a Down-Stay position, drops the leash and disappears from the dog's sight. The dog receives praise and treats if the hamburger remains untouched.

The kennel design at the Breeding Station focuses on interaction, which minimizes the amount of barking. There are 10 interconnected octagonal pavilions so the dogs can see each other as well as people entering the area. Skylights and windows allow in natural light.

Each dog lives with a roommate, and all the dogs go out to the play yard in small groups. Dogs are regularly walked by volunteers on nearby walking paths, and there is a large play yard with agility equipment to keep the dogs fit. When the weather doesn't permit outside play time, the dogs exercise by walking on treadmills.

Special care is also taken throughout the Breeding Station to guard against the introduction of germs. Everything that enters the facility goes





At the Breeding Station, an adult German Shepherd Dog enjoys playtime.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SEEING EYE



A female breeding dog shakes hands with a staff member and awaits her reward — a ball to chase!



through various procedures to minimize the risk of bringing contaminants inside.

Dogs assigned to the Breeding Station typically stay for about two years, retiring when they are about 4 years old.

Females generally have three to four litters and males typically sire eight to 10 litters. Most dogs who retire from breeding after the normal stay do not re-enter training to become guides. "Blind people invest so much time and emotion with their dog," Gibbon says. "While guide dogs can work eight to 10 years, getting a dog that is 4 years old versus 2 years old is viewed as having that much less time with them."

Dogs retired from the breeding program are first offered back to the volunteer puppy raisers who raised them; the rest are adopted to new forever homes. If a dog retires from breeding early for any reason (i.e., she doesn't come into season regularly), she is often placed back into guide training.

## Raised with love

When the puppies turn 7 weeks old, they leave the Breeding Station and spend the next year living in homes with volunteer puppy raisers. More than 500 families raise these puppies in their home, teaching them basic obedience, house manners and socialization for approximately one year.

The Seeing Eye's puppy-raising program began as a project for 4-H, which is a national youth development organization. Today, the program has expanded to include families affiliated with 4-H as well as retired couples and married couples without children. Some colleges, including Rutgers University and the University of Delaware, offer clubs for students who raise Seeing Eye puppies.

"About two-thirds of our families are repeat puppy raisers," Gibbon says, "and in many cases, we have multiple generations of families raising puppies. We have a 21-Club for volunteers who've raised at least 21 puppies and it's not a small group. We also have a current volunteer raising her 60th puppy. Our volunteers understand their jobs are to make each puppy as good a guide as they can and to build its potential to be able to do this special job."

At approximately 14 months of age, the puppies return to The Seeing Eye. Each dog is evaluated and enters either the breeding program or the guide-dog training program. "All of our dogs are trained as guides to a certain level," Gibbon says. "The dogs being considered for breeding will go through a two-month training program while the guide-dog candidates will have four months of training."

Some dogs don't qualify for either program, most often due to health issues. Dogs who don't enter the programs are offered up for adoption.



COURTESY OF THE SEEING EYE



## Practice makes perfect

The Seeing Eye employs 25 trainers, grouped into five teams of five instructors each. Each team also has a senior manager who manages and guides the team through the training cycle for dogs and students. Each trainer works with up to eight dogs at a time during each training cycle.

"Every month there's a team with different dogs at different stages," says Joan Markey, master instructor at The Seeing Eye. "One team is always ready to go into class with the incoming students while another team is ready to start training a new batch of dogs. Some of the dogs will have just returned from the puppy raisers. Others will have gone through training and either we didn't have a match for them or they weren't ready to be paired with a student. We'll put these dogs through training again."

The instructors work with each of the new dogs twice a day. They are taught basic voice commands, including "foward," "left," "right," "hup-up" to quicken the pace and "pfui" to correct a mistake. They also get accustomed to wearing a harness and how to pull. "If a dog doesn't learn to pull, a blind person is not going to be able to feel how the dog is guiding them," Markey says.

The next part of training occurs in real-world settings. "We move from the campus and train in downtown Morristown," Markey says. "This training can be stressful on the dogs. We'll start seeing them

spook on isolated objects if it's in their personality. We'll also take the dogs into New York City to determine if they are good city dogs."

A critical element in the overall training is teaching the dogs about traffic. "There is so much involved in teaching them to stop at curbs and to clear their person around any obstacles," Markey says. "They have to stay focused on the work and not at the dog that's barking at them. The dogs also have to learn intelligent disobedience, which means refusing to go when it's not safe."

Although the days are structured with intense training, the importance of playtime does not diminish. "The dogs get a lot of recreation every day," Markey says. Play yards are equipped with a variety of toys and both volunteers and kennel staff spend their days in constant interaction with the dogs.

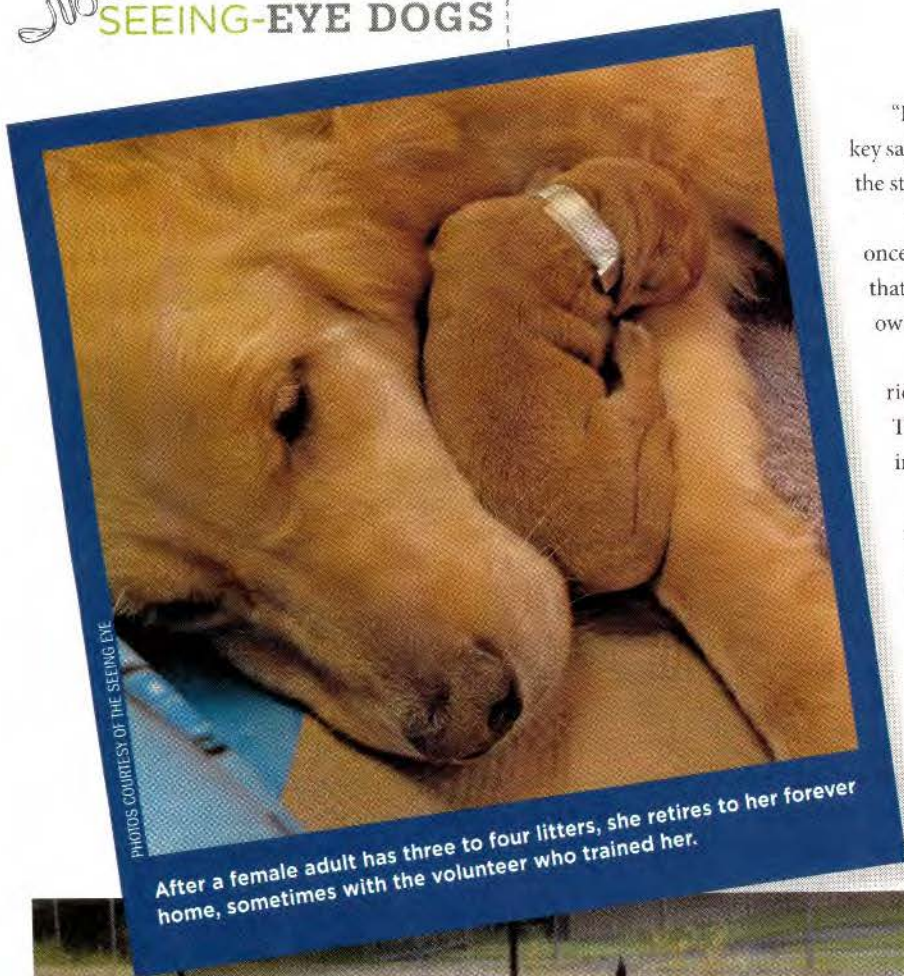
## Pairing up

Each month, there are about 40 trained dogs ready for the incoming class. "Probably half of our dogs won't be placed (at that time), but it's really important to match individual students with the best dog for their individual situation," Markey says. Dogs not matched in that class will be assigned when a good match is found for them in future classes. Variations in temperament, size, strength, stride and energy are characteristics that must be closely matched to create successful partnerships.



The Seeing Eye primarily breeds and trains Golden and Labrador Retrievers and German Shepherd Dogs, whose temperament and trainability are ideal for the job.





PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SEEING EYE

After a female adult has three to four litters, she retires to her forever home, sometimes with the volunteer who trained her.

"It's like Christmas when we give out the dogs," Markey says. "The excitement level is beyond belief. It's not just the students who feel that way; it's the instructors, too."

The students assume care and feeding of the dogs once they are assigned. "The dog is the student's from that point forward," Markey says. "They retain full ownership of the animal."

During their training, students stay in dormitories at The Seeing Eye for about three to four weeks. The time is spent establishing their bond and learning how to work with their dog.

"We're constantly teaching the students about dog behavior, how to control their dog and how to groom them," Markey says. "We stress the importance that both the handler and the dog must give 100 percent. These are just dogs. Their specialized training will go right out the door if the human part of the equation doesn't do what they should."

Follow-up support is an important component of the program. "If issues develop once the graduates get home, we'll give them advice over the phone to help solve the problem,"



A pack of females run in the Breeding Station play yard.



Markey says. "But if the problems continue, part of our job as instructors is to go wherever they live and offer additional training."

With a waiting list of hundreds of people wanting to adopt, there's no shortage of homes for the dogs who don't get paired with students. "We also have several law-enforcement agencies that take our dogs," Markey says. "We refer to these dogs as having a career change. They have been socialized in a home, they know basic obedience commands and they want to work."

### A new lease on life

Murray received her first Seeing Eye dog in 2004, a Golden Retriever named Winny. "I was terrified when I went for my training," Murray says. "But when you take that first step with your dog, it's both exciting and scary. It's so freeing not having to rely on a cane or another person."

Winny was retired after five years of service due to health issues. In 2009, Murray received her second dog, a German Shepherd Dog named Becca. Each graduate owns his or her dog, so they decide what happens when it's time to retire the dog. Most people keep their retired dogs as pets and get a replacement guide dog. Others might find another home for the dog — sometimes with a family member. Winny became the family pet when Becca came on as Murray's new guide dog.

Murray's loss of vision didn't slow her down. She got married as planned and has two sons. "As a Mom, I cook and clean and do all the things that Moms do except drive," says Murray, who volunteers at The Seeing Eye as a tour guide and often gives talks to schools and other groups about the organization. "I don't need Becca to work with me in the house because I know my house, but Becca enables me to get out and do things." When her harness is off at home, Becca is "off duty," just like a regular pet dog. "She's like a policeman. She knows when the harness is on, she's on duty," Murray says.

"With Becca, I now feel people are looking at the dog first and that my vision is secondary," she says. "It's a totally different feeling. I am no longer the blind lady." 🐾

Meredith Wargo is an award-winning freelance writer in Houston.

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### DID YOU KNOW?

Most dogs have four toes on each paw for a total of 16. Some dogs have dewclaws (an extra digit on the front and/or back paws), which are often removed when puppies are only a few days old.

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