

Dogs guide Goshen woman to richer life

Heather Yakin

Middletown Times Herald-Record
USA TODAY NETWORK

GOSHEN - Margaret "Meg" Gardner can't imagine life without her dogs.

These days, her companions are guide dog Anderson, a friendly yellow Labrador retriever, and retired guide dog Kelley, and equally friendly black Lab.

"It's just a part of me. It's who I am," Gardner said.

As a lifelong lover of animals, she said, it was natural that, after losing what little sight she had at age 16, she would eventually get a guide dog. Just after graduating college in 1970, that's just what she did, going through Guiding Eyes for the Blind in Yorktown Heights (<https://www.guidingeyes.org/>). She lived in Westchester County at the time, and the organization was the closest, she said. She has stuck with the organization ever since, and in August she got her sixth guide dog, Anderson, a friendly yellow Labrador retriever.

The dogs helped her through graduate school, her move to Orange County in 1974 for a job opportunity, through life during her 30-year career as a psychiatric therapist, and navigating life now as a retiree.

Her dogs also benefited her clients over the years, Gardner said, at times serving double duty as therapy dogs, too.

"My clients would sit on the floor and wrap their arms around my dog," Gardner said.

Gardner has had service dogs for almost all of the past 50 years and three months.

Her first was Nita, a golden retriever with a penny-colored body and platinum belly, though the 1970s. From late 1979 to 1992 there was Blaze, a border collie. Next was Osborn, a pale yellow Lab, who Gardner had from 1993 to 2007. Windy S. took over guide duties in 2004, and lived until 2013. Kelley took over duties in 2012, and was Gardner's guide until Anderson took over in late August.

"All my dogs are smart," she says, seated comfortably in her tidy home in Goshen, with Kelley and Anderson curled up by her feet. She nods toward Anderson. "This one is sharp as a tack."

Most dogs work for eight or nine



Margaret Gardner and her guide dog, Anderson, get ready for a walk. [PHOTOS BY ALLYSE PULLIAM/FOR THE TIMES HERALD-RECORD]

years, she said. Gardner has kept all of her dogs as companions after their retirements, in part because of her love for them and in part because she feels her guides also need canine companionship.

"I kept my dogs until it was time for God to take them to guide dog heaven," she said.

After Osborn died, she got a young chocolate Lab-foxhound mix named Ella Fitzgerald through friends to keep Windy company, she said. Ella, whose exact age no one knew, lived to about age 14.

Gardner sings the praises of Guiding Eyes for the Blind.

The non-profit, based in Yorktown Heights with a canine development center in Patterson, provides guide dogs to people with vision loss, for greater independence. It costs between \$50,000 to \$100,000 to breed, raise, train, and match each dog to an owner and provide a lifetime of support, according to the organization, but Guid-

ing Eyes provides its services and dogs free of charge. In just over 65 years, they've graduated more than 8,000 guide dog teams, with 1,000 active teams. They average 170 dogs placed each year.

Her dogs helped her through her career and to get around, Gardner said, but they mean much more to her.

"The most important thing, and let's face it - is the company," she said. "And the protection, and just being around."

These days, Anderson accompanies Gardner on trips to the mall or to the doctor, or wherever else she needs or wants to go. He recently had his very first experience with an elevator at a doctor's visit, she said. On the way in, she tapped the elevator so he'd understand it was a door. On the way out, she said, he had caught on and knew what to do.

It isn't all hard work, though. She has gone with Anderson to the Orange County Arboretum. They'll go to church



Kelley, a black lab, is a retired guide dog.

when she can get a ride.

A few days ago, Gardner wanted some air, so a friend took her to Soon's Orchard.

"Anderson and I went on a hayride," she said. "A nice hayride, through the pumpkin patch and the apple trees. It was fun."

hyakin@th-record.com