

DOGS

special canines to strut their stuff

By Geoffrey Bilau | Staff Writer

THE dogs are hosting an open house. No, it's not in somebody's back yard in a makeshift 4-by-3 box cobbled together out of fence boards and old wood paneling. Being sent to this doghouse isn't a bad thing.

Guide Dogs of America, the Sylmar-based non-profit organization that breeds, raises and trains guide dogs for the blind, is opening its doors on June 7, and welcoming the public to learn a little bit about all that goes into turning cute puppies into remarkable companions.

"Most people have seen guide dogs, but have no idea about the training it takes for a puppy to become part of a working guide dog team," said Jay Bormann, president of Guide Dogs of America. "Our open house offers area residents a chance to see this first hand and learn more about our program."

The cost alone to train one dog is surprising enough — \$38,000. This cost, which comes entirely from private donations, takes the puppy from birth to vet care, including extensive testing of joints, eyes and heart, through instruction by board-certified trainers and a 28-day in-house training program where the dog recipient trains along with the dog.

The dogs are provided to the visually impaired at no cost to them.

Founded in 1948 by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, Guide Dogs of America is one of only 11 guide dog schools in the United States. This marks the 16th year it has hosted the open house.

The event includes campus tours, guide dog demonstrations, a barbecue and a silent auction, but the highlight is always the obstacle course. Guide dogs in training will navigate their way through a maze of common distractions.

"Everything from sitting still in front of a plate of dog biscuits atop a coffee table to young boys swinging hot dogs in their faces," said development coordinator Rhonda Bissell. "If they're in harness, they're working, they're on duty. When the jacket is on, that's their business suit and they need to behave."

Bissell said guide dog training is especially tricky because beyond learning obedience and special commands, the dogs must also learn intelligent disobedience.

"It's one thing to be a trained dog, but a guide



A pair of guide dogs in training gets some love and attention at last year's open house.

GUIDE DOGS OF AMERICA OPEN HOUSE

13445 Glenoaks Blvd., Sylmar

11 a.m.-4 p.m. June 7

Free

(818) 362-5834

dog needs to learn if it's told to go forward to disobey that command if it puts the human companion in danger," Bissell said.

For that reason, only 50 percent of the dogs that go through training actually graduate to become guide dogs. Those who don't are offered back as a pet to the family that raised them or go on to work

in other service industries.

Those attending the open house can learn about volunteer opportunities with the school, including becoming a puppy raising family.

"The puppies need socialization," Bissell said. "Taking the dog with you to the grocery store, restaurants, when you get a hair cut, riding a bus, and they have to live in the home. We want them to get lots of love and attention in the home."

It's a lot of work, she said, like taking a child everywhere. And just when the pup is perfectly behaved, it's time to return to the school.

"It's kind of sad, but I say it's a win-win situation," Bissell said. "If he makes it, you've done something wonderful for someone else. If he doesn't make it, you get first shot at adopting him yourself."

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