

# Lamorinda Puppy Raisers Give of Selves for Great Cause

By Jennifer Wake



Cindy Sevilla, walks throughout La Fiesta Square with Guide Dog trainee, Margie. courtesy of Cinda MacKinnon

When Orinda resident Cinda MacKinnon first signed up to raise puppies for Guide Dogs for the Blind three years ago, she envisioned training part-time, while working from home.

She soon learned that turning a little puppy into a working dog – one that a blind person eventually will entrust with their lives – is not an easy task.

MacKinnon, and her husband Tom, dedicated 18 months to socialize Rhapsody, a golden retriever who recently graduated and was partnered with Matthew Friend, who is not only blind, but deaf as well. Because of his disabilities, Friend did not take many walks before he had Rhapsody, but now he walks everywhere.

Following Rhapsody's graduation, the MacKinnons continued to be part of the puppy raising team by babysitting for other guide dog puppies.

"It's a lot like having a baby," MacKinnon explained. "You can't leave the dog in the house to simply go to the cleaners; they need to be watched all the time." Puppies are trained to behave as they would with a blind person. They are taught to relieve themselves on a leash, for example, since a blind person will have to relieve the dog this way.

Guide Dogs for the Blind CEO, Bob Phillips, explained that you teach the puppy to behave under certain circumstances.

When Rhapsody was only 8-weeks-old, the MacKinnons began training her to sit, to stop chewing on furniture, to not eat food off tables – basically learn un-puppy-like behaviors while she was "working."

"Our work is to socialize in every instance: at work, at home, at the grocery, on trains or BART, at restaurants," MacKinnon said.

Since a lot of the socialization training happens outside the home, MacKinnon and her puppy raising leader, Lafayette resident Cindy Sevilla, rely on Lamorinda businesses to help. Fortunately, business owners in the area have been very open to them.

"Amarin Thai Cuisine in Lafayette has let me train every puppy I've had, and Clocks, Etc. has been fabulous letting us in," said Sevilla, who has trained 13 puppies over the past eight years. She is constantly on the lookout for socializing opportunities for her 8-month-old trainee, Margie.

"It's important that dogs don't rush up stairs or run down stairs," Sevilla explained, as she walked Margie steadily up and down stairs throughout La Fiesta Square in Lafayette. "Initially, Margie would charge upstairs, so I've done a lot of body blocking (blocking Margie's rush upstairs by squeezing her between the wall and Sevilla's legs)."

She also takes Margie on elevators, and is teaching her to sleep under the table at restaurants or under desks at work. Her entire family gets involved.

Sevilla's husband, Al, has taken puppies to work with him. Her three children, Ginger, Sean, and Hayley, take puppies to work, to school, or to the gym.

After socialization training, the puppies return to Guide Dogs for the Blind for 10 weeks of intensive training, which includes things like teaching dogs to look for overhead obstacles that might injure their partner – an incredibly difficult task, considering the anatomy of the animal. Those wanting dogs also go through a rigorous application and training process before being partnered with a guide dog.

Guide Dogs for the Blind is fully supported by private donations. It offers everything from transportation to room and board, including training and all its support services free of charge to the blind or to the visually impaired student.

The organization recently began the K9 Buddy program for blind children who are too young for guide dogs.

"The child learns about the human-animal bond," said Phillips, whose daughter is blind. "They are partnered with a dog that might be perfect in every way, but are not yet ready to guide. Parents might view a dog as another distraction, but they have never seen a well-behaved dog.

Some children partnered with a K9 Buddy, Phillips noted, can take the dogs to school, making it easier to meet people and make friends.

"We have shifted our focus to a broader way of thinking of the impact when we partner a guide dog with a blind person; the natural interdependency we place between guide dogs and their partners," Phillips said.

Although both Sevilla and MacKinnon said they started volunteering with Guide Dogs for the Blind to work with the dogs, they now do it for the people as well. "It's all a big community," Sevilla said.

Phillips defines it as the power of partnership to improve quality of life. "We support a lifestyle of cooperation, collaboration and partnership."

Thanks to organizations like Guide Dogs for the Blind and its volunteers, there are currently more than ten thousand people with vision loss enjoying the companionship and safety of a guide dog.

For more information on Guide Dogs for the Blind, how to volunteer, or to refer a family with blind children or adults interested in services available, visit [www.guidedogs.com](http://www.guidedogs.com).



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