

Trust Is The Key For Special Team

BY SUSAN USHER

When Athena's on her leash, she's like any other puppy, ready to romp and chew. But put on her working uniform—a harness—and she's suddenly all business.

That's good, because she's on call 24 hours a day for an important job. A Leader Dog, Athena is trained to be the trusted companion to her owner, Barbara Jones. Together, they're making a great team.

Athena can find an empty chair for Barbara in a strange office (a real asset when job interviewing), navigate streets and staircases—and even find a phone booth or drink machine on command.

The 25-year-old daughter of Billy and Inez Jones of Ash, Barbara was born 14 weeks prematurely, she said. She's been blind ever since due to optic nerve damage from administration of too much oxygen in the hospital.

Barbara's a petite brunette with soft, brown eyes, a friendly, trusting smile—and quiet determination. She hasn't let blindness get in the way of attaining personal goals that range from playing the piano to earning a bachelor's degree.

Last December, the Shallotte Lions Club and Lions International offered to sponsor her in Leader Dog School at Rochester, Minn., a package worth about \$7,000 that would cost her essentially nothing, she said. The Leader Dog program is patterned after the Seeing Eye Dog program.

It was an opportunity Barbara couldn't pass up; in early June she took her first trip by airplane, to Rochester, alone. But when she returned on July 2, she brought a friend, Athena. They were met at the airport by family and friends and members of the Shallotte Lions Club. According to one club member, Jess Parker, Athena was the only calm one there.

At home in Ash, she's fit in well with the family. "She's very intelligent," Inez Jones said of Athena, as well as friendly.

Athena is a 17-month-old Golden Retriever, a breed growing in popularity as a companion to the blind because of their gentle nature and readiness to learn.

Barbara had considered getting a dog before, but wasn't sure she wanted the added responsibility.

However, the need for a dog—and for greater independence of movement—became more apparent as the West Brunswick High School graduate found her way around the campus of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. A graduate in biology, she hopes to find work interpreting statistics in the Greensboro area following her October marriage to Jeff Crabtree, a friend from high school.

In the city and suburbs with their sidewalks and streetcurbs, she'll be able to make even better use of Athena's special skills.

Dogs, she said, make better guides than people.

"People can forget and let you run into things," she said. "Athena doesn't."

Not every student at Leader Dog School "graduates" and takes home a dog. But Barbara wasn't

going to let that happen to her, she said. "I was determined I was not going home without her."

Dogs and their blind owners are coupled by matching personal traits such as personality and walking

gait; Barbara considers it a personal compliment that Athena is such a friendly and loving dog.

But there were moments of doubt. "I'm a fast walker," recalled Barbara. "But when they first gave her to me, Athena almost pulled my arm out of the socket."

Students received their dogs after about a week of classes. From that point on, they were constant companions, together at meals and sharing dormitory rooms.

But at first, said Barbara, "no one trusted their dog. The dogs were attached to their trainers and wouldn't do what we said."

But the relationships blossomed quickly. Students learned to never strike their dogs, but to correct them with their leashes and with voice inflections. "A lot of it is in the voice," she said. Encouraged with the right tones, a Leader Dog will do extra to get the job done.

"The dogs are so teachable," noted Barbara. After first teaching Athena the look and smell of a drink machine, Barbara can say, "Let's go find a drink machine" and Athena can lead her to one.

Of course, there was the time Athena led her instead to a phone booth. But soon Athena learned the difference.

Once, Barbara miscalculated her location. Thinking she was in front of a campus building, she told Athena to "find the door." Find a door she did—to the funeral parlor next door to campus. But she had done as told and was praised, not scolded.

The student-dog pairs first ventured out together in the controlled environment of the campus, then on shopping trips and traffic checks in town. But complete trust in their Leader Dogs wasn't always quick to develop for students accustomed to relying on their own judgment.

Once, Barbara listened to traffic from the curb. Thinking it all clear, she signaled the dog to move forward. But Athena had ideas of her own—and refused to lead Barbara into the street.

From seemingly out of nowhere a car had silently and suddenly entered the roadway. The scene had been staged by their trainer.

"That's when our trust became bonded," said Barbara, leaning down to pat Athena's silky brown topcoat.

"I am so pleased to have her," she continued, her eyes lighting up with satisfaction and a smile spreading across her face. "But it will take six months to a year for us to become what they call 'seasoned.'"

But Athena's catching on fast. After they came home in July, Barbara and Athena went into Shallotte with Mrs. Jones.

"A Coke machine was the first thing she found," said Inez Jones.

Added Barbara, "She was hot and thirsty and I guess she thought I was too."



THEIRS is a relationship bonded in trust. Here, Athena leads Barbara safely up the steps to the back porch.

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