

Guide Dogs for the Blind leader Pat Whitehead, foreground, leads a gaggle of guide dog puppies and "raisers" on a Metro Rail journey from Long Beach to Union Station. Background, front row center, retired rail instruction coordinator Bob Johnson arranges the special event for MTA.



PHOTOS BY GAYLE ANDERSON

Metro Rail's Cutest Customers Take Annual Trek Downtown

By GAYLE ANDERSON

(June 17, 2003) Guide Dog puppies, Metro Rail's cutest customers, and, arguably, the most well-behaved, boarded a Metro Blue Line train in Long Beach, June 7, bound for Olvera Street and glory.

Some 30 puppies-in-training were on the Guide Dogs for the Blind's eighth annual trek to Union Station and Olvera Street for a socialization outing with their "raisers."

Bob Johnson, a rail instruction coordinator who retired from MTA in 2002, has arranged for the annual trek for the past seven years. What began as a special event track allocation task, has evolved into an active volunteer opportunity for Johnson, who has enlisted his son, Johnny, 14, and niece, Sarah Coromina, 11, into the service of L.A. Southwest Guide Dog Raisers, a local element of the Guide Dog organization that provides canine guides and companions for the blind.

Johnson rolled out the rail carpet for the group, some of whom came from faraway places like Phoenix, Apple Valley and Riverside.

Foster parents to puppies

Raisers are volunteers who act as



Sarah Hirsch and Glee, official Guide Dog Pup.



foster parents for the first 15 months of a guide dog's life. Although the real training for navigation skills comes later at a special training facility, life with the raisers is like an ideal childhood where the pups learn good manners, socialization, bonding, and how to recognize and deal with all the different sights, surprising sounds and unexpected textures of the big world outside.

A photo opportunity and media blitz arranged by José Ubaldó of MTA Media Relations launched this year's adventure. One of those interviewed was 15-year-old Sarah Hirsch and her guide dog puppy, Glee, who, at nearly 15 months, is approaching the next step in training, a "college" for serious guide dogs.

Sarah got Glee when the pup was only eight weeks old.

"Most of our training is socializing. We take them out in public and get them used to people", said Sarah. "We teach them the basic commands, such as sit, stand, come and teach them how to walk next to people. I take Glee to restaurants, bowling alleys, even to my dance class."

The two seem to be inseparable: "She sleeps on a pillow next to my bed," says Sarah.

Sarah's parents, Karen and Manny Hirsch, help the endeavor on a daily basis, so much so that Glee is a bonafied member of the family.

"It will be hard when Glee leaves for guide dog training; we'll miss her, but we think of it as sending our children off to college," says Karen Hirsch. "You worry about how they'll do and, at the same time, you're confident that everything will be great."

Doggie trek yields rail results

Guide Dogs for the Blind leader Pat Whitehead coordinated the doggie trek on Metro Rail, bringing together some 10 local clubs for the annual event.

Over lunch in Olvera Street, former MTA Rail Instruction Coordinator Bob Johnson, center, enlists niece Sarah Coromina and son Johnny into service.



BOB JOHNSON PHOTO

There's a right way to ride Metro Rail and there's a wrong way to ride Metro Rail.



Pups exit the Union Station Metro Rail Station en route to Olvera Street.



What's wrong with this picture: Nothing. Neither dancers, drums, children, crowds nor wafts of chorizo shall distract this guide dog pup.



Raisers line up puppies in training exercise.

"We assess how the dogs do on the platform, how they do inside the cars: can they settle down? We teach them how to sit with their head facing outward," said Whitehead. "We teach the raisers how to have them get in and out of a car. We take care to make sure the tail is out of the way of walking passengers. One puppy was looking around a little longer, panting a little, then relaxed and promptly fell asleep, very comfortable. Now, that's a good puppy."

The trek to Olvera Street was Glee's first ride on a train, not counting the Monorail at Disneyland. Seats are cramped, so dogs are taught to sit under the seats between their caretaker's legs facing the aisle. Glee already knows to wait at the door and stop at the steps, said Sarah.

What it takes to raise a puppy

"It takes praise and consistency, some correction, and more praise to raise a guide dog puppy and lots of love," said Whitehead.

"That's the standard," she added. "In this first phase of training, we teach the raisers techniques to train the puppies in situations such as close dog proximity, how to be around food and ignore it, how to ignore little children who want to play."

After the pups complete the "raising" phase, state licensed trainers will teach harness training, which involves heights, curbs, up and down, judging distances of potential hazards such as overhangs and tree branches, crossing streets, and a wonderful concept known as "intelligent disobedience."

"That's when you direct the dog to cross the street but the dog sees a car coming. The dog, seeing the car that you don't see, will stay in place rather than go forward," she explained.

"You have to have this amazing trust."

The result is a partnership of immeasurable proportions. "The guide dog gives a blind or visually impaired person independence and dignity, she says. "With a guide dog, they can be on their own."

Everyone gathers for giant group photo in an Olvera Street plaza.



After a rousing afternoon at Olvera Street sampling the food as well as a performance of colorful dancers, drumming and a giant group photo in the plaza, Bob Johnson herded the group back safely on the Metro Red Line.

"It's a long way to Long Beach, but we know how to get there safely," said Johnson. "We'll be back next year," he promised.

And, seven years counting, he's a man of his word.

[Back to MTA Report](#)