Reflections about Raising a Leader Dog for the Blind vs.
Fostering Muncie Animal Rescue Fund Dogs

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

Dogs are used for so many purposes in today's world. They are used to hunt, search for and rescue endangered individuals, keep our country safe by sniffing out bombs and drugs, entertain us in dog shows, lead the blind, or simply provide companionship.

Dogs are of particular interest to me. I am a dog-lover! Therefore, my honors project has two, hands-on, experiential components and a final, reflective component comparing my experiences as both a volunteer puppy raiser for Leader Dog for the Blind and a foster mom for the Muncie Animal Rescue Fund.

During the first experiential component, I spent ten months raising a Golden Retriever Leader Dog for the Blind puppy named Tater. I followed all of the guidelines and expectations provided by Leader Dogs for the Blind out of Rochester, Michigan and learned a great deal from the experience about dog training and myself.

For the second experiential component, I spent five months being a foster mom for the Muncie Animal Rescue Fund. I housed, cared for, and adopted out four dogs during that time—Penny, a German Shepherd mix, Jabba, a German Shepherd/Rottweiler/Border Collie mix, Maggie, a Mountain Curr, and Miles, a Beagle/Corgi mix.

Finally, for the reflective component, I wrote an essay explaining and comparing the two experiences. In the essay, I address the processes to become both a Leader Dog puppy raiser and an ARF foster mom, my goals during each experience, the challenges I faced, the training techniques I used, and how rewarding each experience felt.
Acknowledgements

I need to extend thanks to Mary Simpson for all of her advice and council as I raised Tater. Her role, as my Leader Dog Puppy Counselor, taught me much more about dog training than I expected. I also learned about myself from her lessons on dog training and began developing the patience necessary to successfully eliminate undesirable canine behaviors and replace them with appropriate ones. I count such techniques as priceless skills under my belt and will continue to use them with all of my future dog training encounters.

I also extend thanks to Nikki Stephenson for allowing me to be self-accommodating. My foster mom position with the Muncie Animal Rescue Fund comes with very few direct responsibilities. I must care for the animals' needs, but I benefit more from their companionship than the shelter does from me fostering. I enter my home after long days of classes to a tail-wagging welcome that otherwise, I could not afford. ARF pays for food, treats, toys, and vet expenses in exchange for my priceless time of cuddles, kisses, and companionship. Again, I thank Nikki for allowing me to always have a canine companion by simply opening my home and being willing to spend time training ARF's abandoned pets.

Finally, I need to thank Joan Studnicky. She has been my academic advisor at Ball State for the past four and a half years and has dealt with my many crazy adventures. Not only was she a strong supporter for me on campus when I brought my squirming, distraction, Tater, into her classroom, she also encouraged me when I found out the bad news about his failure. She is a non-conventional professor who has gone the extra mile for me.
Resources

- Leader Dogs for the Blind of Rochester, Michigan
  http://www.leaderdog.org/site/PageServer

- The Leader Dogs for the Blind Volunteer Puppy Raiser Manual

- The Muncie Animal Rescue Fund (ARF)
  www.animalrescuefund.us
Reflections about Raising a Leader Dog for the Blind vs. Fostering Muncie Animal Rescue Fund Dogs

After spending ten months as a volunteer puppy raiser for Leader Dog for the Blind and five months as an Animal Rescue Fund foster mom, reflecting on the similarities and differences of the two experiences has helped me appreciate the depth of the two experiences. The lessons learned about dog training and myself are priceless, life lessons that I would not have encountered doing any other project.

Becoming a Leader Dogs puppy raiser was a long process. Despite the overwhelming need for volunteer puppy raisers, an approval and delay period is built into the process of applying for the opportunity. First, I completed an application. Then, about two months later, I finally received an acceptance letter informing me that I would become a Leader Dog puppy raiser within six months and that I should begin choosing a name for my puppy. It may seem like a trivial task, but choosing a name for your puppy really can take six months. For me, choosing the name "Tater" took about two months. However, in about four months, I received an unexpected call from Leader Dogs for the Blind. They had a puppy ready for a home and had no available raisers. They asked me to take him! Unfortunately, I was living in a house that forbade pets. In one week, I moved out of my house and into a studio apartment, contacted Leader Dogs to have my residence approved, and drove to Michigan to pick up my new, yearlong project.

The Muncie Animal Rescue Fund acquires cats and dogs in need of permanent homes. Therefore, foster homes are needed for animals that cannot be present around the others. Animals that are heartworm positive or have intestinal parasites are contagious. Such animals are commonly placed in foster homes. Canine or feline mothers who have
weaned their puppies or kittens and are waiting to be spayed also need foster homes. Animals that especially need attention because of neglect, abuse, or special medical needs also must live away from the shelter facility.

To become a foster home for Animal Rescue Fund pets, an application is completed and within a day or two, approval is announced via a phone call. When I received my phone call, I was asked to take a German Shepherd mix that had been at ARF for a long period of time. She did not get along well with other dogs and needed a calmer place to wait for her future family. I was ecstatic to have a dog again and began a new adventure with Penny.

Both Leader Dogs for the Blind and the Muncie Animal Rescue Fund have created application processes in order to approve or refuse the help of volunteers. ARF's process is much quicker and more lenient than Leader Dog's. However, considering the vast amount of misplaced pets ARF adopts out for annually, the process is appropriately timely. Leader Dog's process is much stricter and lengthier to force people to carefully consider the responsibility and time commitment necessary for raising a Leader Dog for the Blind. Another realistic time barrier Leader Dogs for the Blind faces is the breeding patterns of their bitches. Puppies must be assigned on a first-come-first-served basis through the application process, but there are only a limited number of puppies breed each year. They also must ensure that graduating classes do not become too large so puppy return dates must be spaced out appropriately. Therefore, timing, to become a Leader Dog puppy raiser, is more of an issue for Leader Dogs for the Blind than is becoming a foster mom for Muncie's ARF.
My goal for taking on the project of raising a Leader Dog puppy was to change the world for one, legally blind individual. I hoped the individual who received Tater would gain a new sense of freedom and improved mobility. I hoped that, by sacrificing my time and energy to tame an unruly puppy into a service dog, an individual with a disability could lead a more convenient lifestyle. Unfortunately, my goals were unsuccessful. It was determined, after three months of formal training, that Tater, my inconsistent and distractible golden retriever, was not Leader Dog material. I was crushed by my failure until I spoke with my Leader Dog Puppy Counselor. She informed me that, though there were some training techniques I needed more practice enforcing, only two-thirds of Leader Dog puppies actually graduate as Leader Dogs for the Blind. One-third of the dogs bred to be Leader Dogs become "career changed" and go on to be family pets or perform other service tasks.

This realization troubled me even more. I thought, "Why does Leader Dog breed so many dogs if they know that one-third of their offspring will enlarge the pool of homeless pets in America? There are enough animals in shelters! An organization shouldn't actively breed more into the system!" I discussed my concerns again with my Leader Dog Puppy Counselor. She informed me that Leader Dog places "career changed" dogs directly with families that have asked for failed Leader Dogs. In fact, the organization has a waiting list of over 2,000 families waiting to welcome a "career changed" Leader Dog. Of the one-third dogs who are "career changed", one-third of them actually become another type of service animal. Some become search and rescue dogs. While others become U.S. Customs Narcotics dogs. Therapy dog certification organizations and PAWS with a Cause also receive "career changed" Leader Dog
puppies. Therefore, "career changed" Leader Dogs are not simply dropped off at a local shelter. These animals are used to their fullest potentials and if that is simply to be a family pet, like Tater, that becomes their life's work.

My goal as a foster mom for ARF was very different. In fact, the goals changed from dog to dog as I encountered their different needs. For Penny, my goal was to help her overcome her fear of people. We worked for weeks to build trust. My goals for Jabba were to build his confidence and teach him basic obedience. I taught him to respond to verbal commands like "come", "sit", "off", and "down". We also worked on impulse control. He had a vivacious puppy nature that easily got the best of him. For Maggie, I worked to change her demeanor. She came to me as a self-sufficient, shelter dog having a macho attitude. I helped her become a dependent, loving pet who showed affection instead of ignoring people altogether. Her independence was evident and it appeared that she did not care if I were around. By the time she was adopted, she slept in bed with me and cuddled during thunderstorms. My goal for Miles was to simply help him heal. If I managed to accomplish any basic training with that stubborn beagle, I considered that a bonus. He came to me so weak from the millions of heartworms leeching his nutrients that I simply wanted him to survive the heartworm treatment.

The goals I had for the two experiential components of my project were very different. Not all of them were achieved, but simply identifying and prioritizing them gave me direction for overcoming the many challenges I encountered along the way.

Many challenges accompanied the experience of raising a Leader Dog puppy. My initial challenge was Muncie's Municipal Transportation Company. To get to and from classes and my new apartment, I needed to ride the MITS city bus daily. Pets on
city buses are prohibited. Therefore, I needed to obtain special permission from the Muncie Transportation Corporation for an eight-week-old puppy, who was not even potty trained, let alone a certified Leader Dog for the Blind to travel with me on the bus. I also needed signatures from each dean of every building I planned to enter with Tater on campus. Then, I had to obtain permission from each of my professors to have a dog in class and permission from all of my fellow classmates to avoid allergy attacks. If Tater were a certified Leader Dog for the Blind, many of these challenges would have been non-issues because, by law, all buses, classrooms, restaurants, businesses, and buildings must welcome individuals with service animals. For me, however, this was not the case.

Having people look at me strangely when I was out grocery shopping with a dog who was desperately trying to keep his excitement in check was just the tip of the iceberg in terms of challenges when raising Tater. Training was a daily challenge. No matter how hard I tried to be consistent, use appropriate vocal tone when reprimanding, and punish fairly, I never seemed to see improvement. My family, friends, and even professors pointed out small gains, but it was a challenge to keep up the hard work when victories were minuscule.

I recall one of my most challenging nights with Tater boiled down to a huge argument with his adjustable cage. I believe it was a Thursday night. I had early classes the next morning, friends who wanted to go out and party, and a ten-week-old puppy with terrible diarrhea. I had not slept well in days because he was still adjusting to being away from his litter. I left Tater in his cage during classes that day due to his unstoppable bowels and was paying for it that evening. He had more energy than an exploding bombshell in my studio apartment. I had already walked him at least three times and he
would not tire out. I bathed him to conquer the terrible stench in the apartment, cleaned up several more piles, and made a special trip to the Laundromat to clean all of my soiled towels, which, of course, he accompanied me to. It did not seem fair to just shove Tater in his cage for the rest of the night when he had been in it for so long all day. I was running very low on patience and the Leader Dog rules stated a maximum time limit for cage inhabitation that I had already reached. At that point, I do not know why, but I decided to change the location of the potty training divider in his enlargeable cage. I wanted to move it to give him a little more room. I guess I rationalized that if he had a larger cage, I could put him in it for a little while longer. I had already decided not to join my friends out on the town and spend the evening in, again, with my messy project. As I struggled with the metal dividing wall, all of my frustration, tiredness, and patience gave in. I pinched my fingers between the bars so badly they began bleeding as I watched my future Leader Dog squirt on my floor—again. I exploded. I just let it out. There were no breaks. It was too much for me. I sobbed. He pranced over to me as if nothing was wrong and all I could do was cry. Yes, I faced many challenges when raising Tater. The biggest challenge was keeping my needs, his needs, the many, new changes, and Leader Dog's expectations all balanced.

As a foster mom, the challenges were different. There were few, set rules to follow so leaving a dog in his cage for longer than the allotted time limit was less of an offense. The challenge presented itself more in saying goodbyes. Every dog that I opened my home for was expected to leave. I could never be sure how well the new families would treat the dogs or if they would pay as much attention to them. Detaching myself
emotionally was the biggest challenge. Trying not to be too pushy about who took the dogs and what I expected of those individuals was hard.

Training challenges also occurred when fostering, but they were nothing compared to the challenges faced when raising a Leader Dog puppy. Instead of facing training challenges each day while the public watched my every move, fostering challenges occurred in the privacy of my own home. Issues with patience crept up just like they did while raising Tater. The first three days fostering Penny were very hard. I had extravagant aspiration for Penny's time spent with me. I hoped to teach her long lists of commands and present a perfect dog to someone in just weeks. Unfortunately, she needed much more time for adjusting than I expected. She barricaded herself in the living room for the first three days because I was being too pushy and she was afraid. I was forced to research German Shepherd breed characteristics, learn more appropriate training techniques to fit her needs, and establish trust before trying anything ambitious. Many hours were spent on the floor just sitting close to each other. Many treats were left on the floor because she was too skittish to take them from my hand. Over time, she learned to trust me and only because I overcame impeding training challenges by forcing myself to change my own behavior.

As a volunteer puppy raiser for Leader Dogs for the Blind, the training techniques I used were explained in the Puppy Raiser Manual I received the day I picked up Tater. In fact, I was asked to sign a contract stating that I would use the described training methods and refrain from any abuse or physical punishment. Therefore, I worked with Tater to progress through his developmental training stages and expectations as they were outlined in my manual. For instance, at nine weeks old, Tater was expected to know his
name and the command "sit". Therefore, during the first week we were together, I
repeated his name over and over and over until he finally responded to it. Then I
rewarded him with treats for responses. I also began teaching him to sit by saying the
command, pushing his body into a sitting position, and then rewarding the position while
repeating the command. Once he began sitting on his own, I took away some of the
support making it more difficult to get a treat. Then I added commands. "Sit," "down,"
"come," "off," "leave it," "give," "park", "stay," "wait," and "back" were all mastered by
the time Tater was returned to Leader Dog ten months later. "Heel" and "mat" still
needed some work, but most golden retrievers struggle to reign in their excitement.
These two commands made it especially difficult.

"Heel" required that Tater walk on a loose leash with his shoulder blades always
less than 4 inches forward of my leg. "Mat" required that Tater go to a designated place
on the floor, usually marked by a blanket or rug, and lie there for as long as I choose
without leaving no matter what happened around him. This command was used to keep
dogs out from under foot when people greeted guests at the door or to exclude play when
children were especially rambunctious. Tater struggled with impulse control, so these
two commands were very difficult for him.

All commands were taught using food rewards and then weaned from food
rewards to praise as they were mastered. All commands were also approximated based
on ability and readiness for challenge. In other words, if Tater knew "sit", but had not yet
mastered "down", I would first have him sit to reward him with praise while getting his
attention. Then, I would help him into a "down" and reward him with a treat.
My training techniques as a foster mom were much less intensive. Anything I taught my foster dogs was to help their stay be less stressful for me and to make them more adoptable. In my house, I have high expectations. Despite their backgrounds, all dogs are expected to learn manners and follow my rules. My main rules are: no urinating or defecating in the house, a dog only receives a treat if he/she is "asking for it" using good manners, no jumping allowed, dogs must only chew on their toys (no furniture, towels, shoes, etc.), only dogs who mind their manners are allowed on the furniture, and all dogs must play nicely with each other and me. Dogs are punished, either verbally or by being caged, for breaking rules. I execute the rules as a form of training as consistently as possible and I find that consistency really helps ARF dogs.

Shelters usually struggle with inconsistency. The sheer number of animals to be moved around and cared for leaves much to be desired in the way of behavior. Different people are always in and out. Some understand training techniques, and some do not. The craziest and most annoying dog usually gets what he or she wants- attention. I try to right this wrong when the dog enters my home. A dog who jumps, gets no attention until all four legs are on the floor. A dog who is rough with me or others during playtime, is secluded to play alone until he/she understands appropriate play. A dog who has no manners, receives no treats until he/she learns not to jump or yank treats away. I establish a simple, consistent pattern and the dogs notice and behave accordingly. It takes some longer than others, but, so far, all have learned to behave. It is not easy when they first enter my home. There are at least three days of chaos where rules, a feeding, and potty schedule are established. After that, manners are expected consistently.
The training techniques used to train a Leader Dog for the Blind puppy and Animal Rescue Fund dogs are very similar. Both types of dogs use commands and reinforcers, usually food or praise, to learn good manners. They thrive on consistency and high expectations. The main difference, however, is the intensity of training. Leader Dogs are expected to be perfect at every moment, with every command, and in every situation. ARF dogs have expectations, but, as a foster mom, I expect inconsistencies— at least for a while. They are moved around so much that they need time to make mistakes, learn from them, and move past them. With Leader Dogs, mistakes in canine behavior have a great deal of effect on their future owner's lives, so behaviors while in training are much more restrictive. It seems that mistakes are inexcusable. At least that is how I felt as a volunteer puppy raiser. I spent ten months desperately trying to keep Tater from making behavioral mistakes. I tried to train him correctly, but in the end, something did not match up. I was told that it was Tater's inconsistency that led to a "career change," so I hope my training was not inconsistent as well. Hence, with my foster dogs, I tried to be as consistent as possible.

When I heard the news that Tater was "career changed," I asked myself, "What was rewarding about being a puppy raiser?" I felt like a complete failure as a dog trainer; but, through the help of family and friends, I realized that there were many valuable lessons learned through the experience. I learned how to place the needs of another living being before my own while balancing my own needs and desires with his. Situations like, "Should I go out to a movie tonight or will two hours in his cage be too much for my little guy?" arose regularly. I was forced to make "single mom decisions" as I called them and consequently, grew as an individual.
I learned a great deal about myself through the experience. I learned that I prefer to care for another's needs before my own. I am happier when I live without a roommate, but am not alone. I heal more quickly from minor illness when I have a dog to walk, feed, let out, and generally keep out of trouble. I like to having a project and a Leader Dog puppy with constant things to learn and skills to hone gave me several, daily projects. I also learned how far I would go to stand up to a medical professional for the health of my dog when I feel a diagnosis or treatment is inappropriate.

I believe the experience as a foster mom was more rewarding. Not only did I get to see dogs change from undernourished, timid, and wild to healthy, friendly, and trained, I was able to fill holes in peoples' lives with loving pets. I believe that almost every person would benefit from having some type of pet. Pets are proven to lower blood pressure, encourage us to exercise, and heighten mental, positive attitude. Therefore, when I fostered dogs, I felt that, on adoption day, I was filling a void in a family's life with that special something they needed. When I introduced Jabba to his current owners, the light in their children's eyes let me know that he was the right dog for them. Even though he was unsure and still working on trust, they got on the floor immediately to play with him and he gave them a chance. That light and connection are what I find so rewarding.

In conclusion, there is nothing more rewarding than spending time with one of God's most amazing creatures- dogs. Any way I find to enjoy the company of a dog is a great way to spend my time. I would be more than willing to continue fostering Muncie Animal Rescue Fund dogs and, someday, when I have the help of a spouse or family, I would like to try raising another Leader Dog puppy for the Blind. Hopefully, the next
one I train will succeed. I know now that it was too big of a task for me to attempt alone; but I learned so much about dog training techniques, my own willingness to sacrifice, and how to be consistent through the experience. All of those skills I used when fostering ARF dogs. In fact, I do not believe I would consider my ARF fostering experience as rewarding if not for the prior experience I gained raising Tater.
Ashley Dougherty's Honors Thesis Grade Sheet

1. Joan A. Studnicki, believe that

Ashley Dougherty should receive (please circle one grade)

☐ A-  B+  B  B-  C+  C  C-  D+  D  D-  F

for her honors thesis entitled Reflections about Raising a Leader Dog for the Blind vs. Fostering Muncie Animal Rescue Fund Dogs.

Comments about thesis strengths or weaknesses:

This appears to have been a valuable learning experience for Ashley. These experiences have forced her to self reflect on her own personal strengths and weaknesses. This self reflection is a skill that she will need in her career as a teacher. She needs to find out that she can not always control all things and when she does not have the ability to control everything how will she then deal with that.

I confirm the that above grade was assigned by me alone and believe that it reflects my most honest opinion about the thesis and that Ashley Dougherty, or other outside sources did not influence me when grading this work.

Signed Joan A. Studnicki Ed D Date 11/05/07
Ashley Dougherty's Honors Thesis Grade Sheet

I, Amanda N. Stephenson, believe that Ashley Dougherty should receive (please circle one grade)

A A- B+ B B- C+ C C- D+ D D- F

for her honors thesis entitled Reflections about Raising a Leader Dog for the Blind vs. Fostering Muncie Animal Rescue Fund Dogs.

Comments about thesis strengths or weaknesses:

I believe Ashley was correct in her evaluation of ARF vs. Leader Dog
I feel Ashley was influenced by her experience with ARF and if she wasn't before she is very sympathetic to the needs of shelter dogs and shelters in general.

I confirm the that above grade was assigned by me alone and believe that it reflects my most honest opinion about the thesis and that Ashley Dougherty, or other outside sources did not influence me when grading this work.

Signed [Signature]  Date 10-25-07
Ashley Dougherty's Honors Thesis Grade Sheet

I, Mary J. Simpson, believe that Ashley Dougherty should receive (please circle one grade)

A ( ) B+ B B- C+ C C- D+ D D- F

for her honors thesis entitled Reflections about Raising a Leader Dog for the Blind vs. Fostering Muncie Animal Rescue Fund Dogs.

Comments about thesis strengths or weaknesses:

Strengths: 1. Well thought out goals 2. A great deal of work, time, energy and emotion went into the project 3. Ashley openly sought counsel and asked questions - she used these to increase her learning 4. Analysis shows reflection and gained insight into personal strengths and challenges.

Weaknesses: 1. Some small details on the Leader Dog process were incorrect (i.e. time, delay, protocol and expectation of perfection) 2. Would have liked her to detail some training experiences with both organizations. 3. Would have preferred at least 1 positive example from the time with Ashley & Tabor.

I confirm the that above grade was assigned by me alone and believe that it reflects my most honest opinion about the thesis and that Ashley Dougherty, or other outside sources did not influence me when grading this work.

Signed Mary Simpson Date 8-29-07