Hadley Presents

Raising a Future Guide Dog

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss the process of raising a puppy to become a guide dog. And our guest is Hadley learning expert and first-time puppy raiser, Jessica Smith. Welcome to the show, Jessica.

Jessica Smith: Thank you for having me, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: I am so glad that you could join me today. We get to talk about one of the coolest things ever. Before we do that though, we should probably learn a little about who you are and what you do.

Jessica Smith: I am a learning expert on the braille team at Hadley. I’ve been here a little over a year. I’ve worked on our braille team to develop our new braille workshops, and I get to work with our learners and answer their questions about braille.

Ricky Enger: So today we're going to, like I said, talk about one of the coolest things ever. Puppies are so awesome, wonderful creatures, and the only thing better than having a puppy is getting to talk about a puppy. We're going to specifically talk about what it is like to be a puppy raiser with respect to having a puppy who is eventually destined to become a guide dog. So you are actually a first-time puppy raiser. And I'm curious, how did you become involved in this? How did you even know that this was something that people could do? And then what made you decide that it was something that you wanted to try?

Jessica Smith: So I've worked in the field of blindness and low vision for about four or five years now. And originally, when I started volunteering to work with people, with visual impairments, I volunteered as a guide for kayakers. And one of the kayakers that I met had a guide dog, and then I met several guide dogs, and who doesn't like being around dogs? So I really enjoyed just taking them for a walk or I would ask to take them for a run. Unfortunately, you don't really run with your guide dog often. So I didn't get to do that, but I enjoyed being around a dog with a really mellow temperament. I hadn't been around labs before.

And I really had a busy life going to graduate school and working full time. So I didn't have time for a dog myself. After I graduated and I started working at Hadley, I actually work from a distance, so I work out of a home office, and I wanted to volunteer and have a guide dog. Someone said, "Oh, that would be perfect for you right now because you're working from home." So he's like my office partner, he's my coworker. So I looked on Southeastern Guide Dogs' website and they had a "how can I help" button. And I signed up to be a puppy raiser.

And you can sign up to be a puppy raiser, or you can sign up to just babysit puppies. They have clubs all throughout the Southeast, so all the way to Texas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama. I looked up a club in my area. They had one in the city that I live in. And I was able to sign up and start going to the puppy meetings to see what it would take to be a puppy raiser. I qualified to do it, and they like a diverse selection of people, from college students to families. I had someone come to my home and kind of check out things, make sure it was safe for a puppy to be here. And then I got on a list and, within a few weeks, I had a puppy.

Ricky Enger: That is so cool. And shout out to Southeastern because I too have worked with Southeastern. Actually, my retired guide is from Southeastern. So love that school. I know that with the pandemic, things are a little different than they normally might be, but in general, how long do you, as a puppy raiser, get to work with the dog before it goes off to additional training at the school?

Jessica Smith: Typically, it's a year. So you usually have the dog for a year and then he will have a date, or she will have a date to go back to the school for more training with an actual dog trainer.

Ricky Enger: You mentioned that when the dog goes to the school, they will be working with a dog trainer, so doing some of the things that get them prepared for doing actual guide work. I know that this is a question that comes up often when I talk with people and they're curious about how the whole guide dog thing works. There are things that a puppy learns as a puppy and things that a puppy will learn later in order to be a guide. So I'm curious what things you, as a raiser, do as far as teaching the dog or providing them with certain things in their environment beyond just the things that you would normally do for a puppy, you know, feed them and love them and brush them and take care of them and all that.

Jessica Smith: So a lot at first. When I first got the guide dog puppy, his name is Mitchell, it was a lot of house manners, so house training, potty training him to go outside, and they have a list of commands that you work with them and teach them. In the first few weeks that you have the puppy, they put you through puppy kindergarten with the dog. And you're usually in a group with several other puppies and they're puppy raisers. And you learn basic skills. And currently, Southeastern Guide Dogs uses a paw pad for training and it kind of helps with placement of the dog next to you. And you teach them sit and down and stay and also stand while they're in puppy training.

I believe it can get more commands throughout that, and then once you get those down, depending on how quickly the dog's picking it up, and of course, it's my first time, so some of the things I was nervous about teaching Mitchell at first, but they really help. They have coordinators in the area. And then you can always reach out to other coordinators if you're having difficulty learning a certain skill. But most of it's house manners is really what we focus on, so not getting on furniture, not table surfing, they call it, where the dogs looking for things to take off of the counter. And then also, bringing the dog in public places. So I have a very active lifestyle. I take Mitchell to a lot of places, so grocery stores or restaurants. And it's getting him used to being around people, and then also, how to settle when you're in a restaurant, how to settle down underneath your chair, or if you take an Uber or a cab somewhere, how to properly sit on the floorboard between your legs so that he is not nervous. So bringing him in all the places is really giving him experience, being around people so that he's not nervous and scared of loud noises or crowded areas.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. And that's such important training to do. I know that that training does last throughout a guide dog's life, even sometimes in really hilarious ways. Like my dog grew up on a farm and there were golf carts all over the farm. For a while after I got him, and even during training, he would see a golf cart and immediately want to jump up on it because that's what he had always done. Making sure that the dog can be in all kinds of different places and still be relaxed and not be so nervous about what's happening, it's such an important thing.

A lot goes into matching a guide dog with a handler, and that's what we call someone who uses a guide dog, a guide dog user, or a guide dog handler. But yeah, a lot goes into choosing the right person for the right dog. Once the time comes to do that. It's not like the school just goes, "Well, this one's next in line. We'll give them to you." The temperament of the dog and the temperament of the handler are things that are considered. You know, how quickly do you walk? What's your lifestyle going to be like? You don't want to have a dog that's very sedate and laid back and perhaps moves nice and calm and slowly, you wouldn’t want to match that with somebody who's super high energy and running all over the place. So, as a puppy raiser, do you have to think about that sort of thing? Do you have to document things about the dog's temperament or walking speed or anything like that as you communicate with the school during when the dog is with you?

Jessica Smith: Generally, I do get surveys that I fill out and it asks specific questions, and I answer those. Some of them do involve temperament. Some of them involve how he reacts to loud noises or novel objects, if he's having difficulty with house training or with greeting strangers or anything like that. We don't really get to work on any of like the placement with someone.

They do have something called a walk and talk. I believe it's every quarter, there's certain milestones where a professional from the guide dog school comes to the area and it's called a walk and talk. And they watch you, observe you working with the dog through different circumstances, around traffic or around novel objects. They'll put something out on the ground that typically dogs would be nervous around, and they see how they react to that and they document all of that.

At the end of the walk and talk, usually a couple of days later, you'll get an email from the school that explains things that you could work on with the dog and things that you also did well with the dog. So that's really encouraging to get those emails. And they document these puppies from the day that they're born, rating their temperament and everything. So, so much goes into that, but we leave that to the professionals at the school to really match them perfectly with a handler.

Ricky Enger: And it's like you said, that feedback is so important for you, as a puppy raiser, to know what should I be working on during this time before the dog leaves eventually for the school and the eventual career. It's your first time as a puppy raiser, and so I suspect that you've learned quite a lot over this process. And if you decide to do this again, a lot of it may be familiar and you may still encounter some new and strange things, but is there anything that stands out to you as like I totally didn't expect that, or it just was surprising to you in some way about this process?

Jessica Smith: I think I was open for anything when I got the guide dog because I didn't really know what to expect or how much training went into it. I think that it was surprising how small signals the dog gives, like for example, like licking their lips while walking through traffic could mean that they're nervous. So learning those cues was something interesting that I didn't expect to learn. I thought I'm just going to take this puppy to places and then the professionals will work on it later.

It's exciting. I think it feels great when you teach them something new and they pick it up. It's really great to see how the dogs like going out. I think some people wonder does the dog like working? I would say Mitchell really likes going out. He gets sad when he knows he's going to go in his kennel, and he sees my bag by the door ready for me to go without him. And he gets excited when I grab his vest that indicates that he's a service dog in training and he gets to see us go out the door. So he's really excited when I take his vest with us because he knows he's going to go out. So I didn't realize how excited they were to actually work for you and work with you.

Ricky Enger: Yeah. That's one of the most amazing things to me too, is when the dog is out of harness, they are a dog. They get to run and play and do all of those things. And yet, when the harness comes out, it's not like we are as humans sometimes, "Oh, it's time to go to work. I'm really sleepy. I wish I could have another hour," and it takes us a bit to get going. With dogs, at least with mine and those that I know who have guide dogs, they see the harness and, oh, they're so excited. "Oh, I get to work. I get to do my job. It's my favorite thing." So yeah, I think you're right. I think they really do enjoy it.

So one final thing I wanted to talk about, which is we touched on this a little earlier, what your process was for looking into how to become a puppy raiser for Southeastern specifically. Can you talk a little about the kinds of qualities that they're looking for in terms of who should be a puppy raiser? Are there things that people who are wanting to do this should think about before investigating how to perhaps go and do this themselves?

Jessica Smith: A lot of the dogs end up going to someone's home, and people live in all different ways. So they really encourage anyone with any kind of lifestyle to volunteer. Like I said earlier, it could be someone who's a student or someone who is a family with children.

I think when you take the survey, to really ask yourself, "Is this something that I can do?" Some of the responsibilities, you have to be able to take the dog places with you, not leave the dog crated all day. So, for me, I work from home, so I knew this was something that I was going to be able to do. But if you work in a workplace where it's not going to be appropriate for you to have the dog with you or there's not space to have the guide dog at work with you, then I would say it's not going to be the best fit because it's not going to help the dog. If he's kenneled all day, he's not going to be getting the experience of being around people or being touched all the time.

That's something you have to look into. And then also, for your home, you have to think, "Am I okay with things being chewed up?" or, "Do I have space for a kennel?" So as a puppy raiser, our responsibility is being able to provide the dog with the food and all of his bedding and toys. The guide dog school does pay for his vet bills. And some of it, like flea and tick medication, is something that the puppy raiser purchases. So you have to make sure that you also have like the finances to be able to care for the dog.

Ricky Enger: And what about pets? Are there any restrictions for, let's say you have a couple of cats or perhaps you have another smaller dog? Is that something that is talked about before you accept a puppy into your house?

Jessica Smith: I believe that you can have, I do know there are puppy raisers who have other pets, I believe as long as that they are vetted, and then you have to take into account having your dog fixed. So when you get a Southeastern guide dog puppy, it is not fixed. Mitchell did not get fixed until he was a year old. So you can't have a female dog with a male dog if they're both not fixed. So they don't want you accidentally breeding them. So that's one thing to take into account. But if you do have other pets, that's fine, but you have to know without a benefit of a doubt that they're not going to be aggressive towards the guide dog.

Ricky Enger: We've talked a lot about what it's like to be a puppy raiser and perhaps how you can get involved, and the one thing that we didn't touch on was kind of the other side of the coin, which is maybe you're thinking about getting a guide dog yourself. We actually have a short series of workshops about what to consider when making that decision of whether a guide dog is right for you. And we've also talked about Southeastern, which is a wonderful, wonderful school, but it's certainly not the only school. There are a number of guide dog schools here in the US, and if you're listening from outside the country, there are guide dog schools in other countries as well.

Do you have experience, Jessica, with people that you've known? What goes into choosing a guide dog school? And you may not know a whole lot about this, but I thought I'd ask if you've ever watched someone kind of go through that process of like, "Which school should I go to and what should I ask?"

Jessica Smith: I have had clients that have asked about it in the past. I always recommend that they check out the different schools' websites and see what their criteria is. I know that one of the major qualifications for any guide dog school is having an orientation and mobility specialist sign off on your skills. So if you're looking into getting a guide dog, definitely brushing up on your O&M skills, meeting with the orientation and mobility specialist, and making sure that your skills are there, is something that the guide dog schools do look for. And, like I said, you do have to have an O&M specialist sign off on those skills. I am not sure what all the qualifications are for each school. It's different. So checking out their websites, and some people even apply for several to get on the list because sometimes there is a wait to get a guide dog.

Ricky Enger: And I know that a lot of schools, in fact, I don't know of any school who doesn't do a home visit just to come in and talk with you about what your environment is like, get an idea of what those orientation and mobility, what those cane skills are like, because it is essential that you be able to travel comfortably with another mobility aid before you look at getting a guide dog. So that home visit is so, so important too.

Every school approaches training differently as well. So I think you're right in looking at the website and thinking about what kind of training philosophically and otherwise makes the most sense to me. What do I feel as I'm reading about this school and making the decision as far as where to apply?

So we're coming up to the end here and ready to wrap it up. I just wanted to know one last thing, and that is I know that things have changed quite a bit with the pandemic. Can you speak to, at least for Southeastern, it may be different from other schools, what's happening as these puppies are being raised and kind of ready to train as guide dogs? I know that some schools are doing in-home trainings. So they have trainers come to your area specifically and work one-on-one with you. Do you know if that's going to happen with Mitchell, or what's the process at the moment?

Jessica Smith: When the pandemic began, we started meeting online. And they have a lot of Facebook videos and they did a calendar challenge as well, where the school would post something from a trainer every day, a special skill to work with your dog for the day, because it was very difficult to go from taking a dog in public. And at one point, we weren't to take the dog in public at all because they weren't sure if the dog could contract the virus or not. So it did, I believe, kind of regress a lot of dogs in their training, but for the at-home challenges, it was things like, "Today, dress up your dog." So one of the things that we do is body handling a lot to get the dog used to being touched in any kind of way, even a veterinary hold. So we dress up the dog to see how they react to it. Mitchell gets dressed up a lot by my daughter, so he's used to that. But every day, it was a different challenge, or working on place, which is putting them on their place and telling them to stay.

So it was something different every day. So they really gave a lot of information to try to help retain those skills. Then we started having Zoom meetings with the groups. So I could tune into a Zoom meeting with my local club and we would talk about things that we've done with the dogs and how we're kind of coping with not being able to take them in as many public places and things that they were struggling with. So they're really supportive. The groups are really supportive of each other and giving each other ideas on how we could continue with training. And Southeastern gave us permission in the past few weeks to be able to meet in person, but we've met at parks in the open areas and worn face masks and social distanced and split up into smaller groups at the park so that we weren't in a big cluster.

So we have continued with the training. I ended up having Mitchell a lot longer. He was supposed to go back to the school in September, and now it looks like I'll have him until next January. So I just try to continue to work on the same skills with him and then note where he's struggling and pick up with more training in those areas.

Ricky Enger: That's great to know. And for those who are hoping to get a guide dog at the moment, and may be between guide dogs, or perhaps it's their first guide dog, there are schools, and you'll have to research what each school is doing, there are schools who will do at home training in your area and matching you with a guide dog. And then there are schools who are holding off on classes until at least January to make sure that everyone is safe and can get the training that they all need.

So the pandemic has certainly made things interesting, but that doesn't mean that if you're getting a guide dog or if you want to do puppy raising, because those things are still happening, no need to put those things on hold. There are ways in place to continue with some of those things.

Well, Jessica, I want to thank you so much for joining us. Is there any last thing that you'd like to leave our listeners with?

Jessica Smith: I definitely encourage anyone who really loves being around dogs and has the time to commit, to look into puppy raising. And if you're not ready to fully commit, you can co-raise with another person or you can volunteer to be a puppy sitter, which means when a puppy raiser goes out of town or they're doing something like taking a college exam, they will send out a email to a group of the puppy sitters to see who's available during those times. So you can always pick up the puppy for a couple hours or volunteer to have the puppy for a weekend and see what it's like before you commit to an entire year of puppy raising.

Jessica Smith: And thank you so much for having me, Ricky. It was a pleasure speaking with you this morning.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. I'm so glad you could join us. Thank you, Jessica, and thank you all for listening.

Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents, or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu, or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.