

I got my first KSDS puppy a month before my wedding. The puppy raiser coordinator called and told me they had a puppy for me if I was ready. I thought to myself, "I just quit my job so I should have plenty of time for a new puppy." Silly me. I'd given no thought to the amount of time that planning a wedding and moving would take, and didn't believe how much time a new puppy required. That was 14 years and 8 puppies ago. Every puppy has been a wild, whacky adventure but worth every roll of paper towels used to clean up puppy puddles, every chewed up shoe, every tear shed on turn-in day.

The question everyone asks is, "How can you give them up after loving them for 18 months?" I always answer, "With a heavy heart and a big box of Kleenex!" But seriously, how could I not give the puppy the opportunity to fulfill her destiny- to help someone with a disability become more independent? In a few months, this silly bundle of energy and love will settle down and become a treasured partner with an important job to do. A job she clearly loves to do for someone who is as devoted to her as she is to them.

The puppies come home with us when they're 8-10 weeks old. We housetrain, socialize, teach manners and general obedience for the next 18 months. With our puppies in their royal blue capes, we go everywhere together: to church, out shopping, to restaurants and to the movies. We always plan a little extra time when we have our puppies with us, because we know we'll attract a lot of attention and many people will stop with questions or just for a little puppy love.

The puppy raiser's favorite day is graduation day. After many trips to the mailbox, praying for the letter telling us that our puppy is going to graduate as a guide or service dog, we travel to Washington, KS for the auspicious event. There, we will meet our puppy's new partner and get to see our puppy in action and hear stories about the past weeks of training together. It's a thrilling day, but also a little sad. It's then we realize that this amazing helper is no longer "our puppy" but has become another person's eyes, legs, or hands.

Being a puppy raiser has been the most rewarding job I've ever done. It's with immeasurable pride that I've watched the puppies I've raised graduate and become indispensable to a person with a disability; someone who may struggle to do the things I take for granted, someone who needs to be loved for who they are, not pitied for what they can't do. My puppy can make that struggle easier; my puppy can provide that love. It's her destiny.

- Judy Norton, DVM, Puppy Raiser in Kansas