

Raising Ruby

By Christine Gillow

I'm a service puppy raiser. I typed that and smiled, because I've come to know that those words invariably lead to these: "But... isn't it hard to give them up?" It's the question a puppy raiser is asked most frequently. Each experience is unique, so each answer is distinctly personal.

In the fall of 1994, I was newly married and settling in to our first tiny apartment in New York. As I was cleaning up and hauling around boxes from the move, I happened to catch the end of a news spot showing a dog in a cape next to a person using a wheelchair. In just those few seconds, I was deeply struck by their bond.

I forgot all about unpacking and called the news station immediately. The report was about an organization called Canine Companions for Independence (CCI) and it had featured individuals with various physical disabilities. Like so many members of the public I meet today, back then I had thought that service dogs were only placed with visually impaired people. Understanding that dogs could assist people with other kinds of disabilities was a revelation for me.

In the years since I was lucky enough to catch that broadcast, I've volunteered with national and local service dog organizations in a range of positions including phone answerer, office worker, stamp licker, beer wench (fundraising is such fun!), writer and presenter, service dog apprentice trainer and board member. All of my service dog volunteer work has been deeply rewarding, but none more so than becoming a service puppy raiser.

There's some soul-searching involved in the decision to raise. Sure, there are significant time and financial commitments, but above all, it's an enormous emotional investment. You'll nurture, fall in love with and eventually have to let go of a dog that is yours in so many ways, and yet not your own. Volunteering

with service dog organizations, I've been fortunate to witness both the bonding process of new teams and the intense love and trust of long-term partnerships, so I felt that my feelings of loss would pale to the privilege and honor of being a part of a service puppy's journey.

Another move presented itself—cross-country to Colorado—and we were again settling into a new home when a small, local organization, Canine Partners of the Rockies, needed raisers for a bouncy litter of nine golden retriever/Labrador retriever puppies. Fifteen years after I saw that first newscast, I felt the time was finally right to raise a service pup. I became Ruby's raiser.



Ruby at ten weeks old: Tiny cape strap vs. big puppy belly!

I'll be honest, I slightly panicked in the weeks leading up to Ruby's arrival, but it had nothing to do with a fear of someday having to give her up. My precious senior-age shepherd mix, Kiva, was well socialized and tolerant, but had never shared her home with another dog. Could she accept a willful, bumptious toddler invading her space? Would she feel threatened or jealous of all the attention I'd need to devote to raising and training a service puppy? Was I asking too much of my old girl?

When Ruby (we mostly called her Roo, like the baby kangaroo she was) bounded in on that first day, I looked at Kiva and bit my lip...but I need not have worried. She accepted the puppy without reservation,

scattering my doubts to the breeze like dandelions. Kiva always turns my worries into wishes and makes them all come true.



Kiva helps teach service puppy Ruby that hats aren't scary.

With Kiva on board, the Roo Crew was off and running! Ruby was adorable and the first week was filled with bliss. By bliss, of course, I mean explosive diarrhea, rabid lunging at the food bowl, destruction of body parts (mine) and screeching in her crate like a deranged chimp without a banana. Ah, puppies. But thanks to clicker training and an efficient round of antibiotics, her meals stopped flying around the house in states solid and otherwise, and in a few days, the whole neighborhood settled back to a full night's sleep. During the next two weeks, I started taking Ruby with me to grocery stores and shops, and as soon as she had her final round of vaccinations, she became my nearly constant companion.

The main goal in raising a service puppy is socialization. Raisers want to expose their pups to as many different experiences and situations as possible. Colorado service puppies in training enjoy the right to extensive public access, so Ruby accompanied me literally everywhere—restaurants, shopping malls, public transportation, sporting events, supermarkets, hair salons. Whenever I looked down, an inquisitive licorice jellybean nose was pointed back up at me...well, at least I hoped it was pointing back up at me. Sometimes I found it buried in the lingerie rack at Macy's.



Narcissus in the fitting room.

Our outings always invited lots of curiosity from the public. I believe that service puppies are in public to educate as well as be educated, so I loved when people would approach us with questions. I know that some puppy raisers have difficulties with people wanting to pet the dogs, but I didn't find it to be an issue. People would rarely try to pet Ruby without asking me, and when they did ask, I'd give them a big smile and thank them for asking. Then I'd politely explain why I couldn't let Ruby be petted while we were training.

The reason? Because it's so important to teach the puppy not to solicit attention. When people refrained from petting Ruby, they were actually contributing to a very valuable part of her education. They were teaching her that there is no benefit to approaching other people when she is with her partner, unless her partner gives her a specific cue to do so. The focus a service dog has on her partner is a lifeline between them.

I found that most people not only respected us, they were truly happy to see us together. Without fail, wherever we went, people would look at us and smile. Seeing the constant smiles of strangers is peculiar...and wonderful. People would grin and hold the door for us, or they'd smile and step aside rather than body check us in a crowded store. Beaming, they'd say, "Your dog is so cute, is she in training?" Friendly faces everywhere I looked. We'd pass hundreds of people in a day and I'd wonder how many hearts and minds my little service puppy had burrowed into. I hope that when someone who had encountered us sees a

person with a disability, they'll think of Ruby. Maybe they'll remember what she was learning and better understand the challenges that person faces. And rather than stare, they'll smile.

Surrounded by smiles, my little pepper pot grew. Ruby was a quick learner; she readily picked up cues like "lap," "stand," and "fix (untangle the leash)," and she excelled on indoor outings. Outdoors was a different story. I always called her "The Mayor"—she excitedly greeted every dog (and leaf and bug) as if she were securing a vote for the next election. But she loved bugs like I love a challenge, so we worked tirelessly on her distractions.



Training at Red Rocks in Morrison.

Equally enthusiastic and determined, Ruby and I were a well-matched team. I became aware of the true level of our teamwork when Ruby was fifteen months old. On a summer day, we visited the Denver Art Museum for the King Tut exhibit; it was dark, crowded, intimate and fascinating. As I toured the exhibit I forgot that Ruby was there, though she was always just at the other end of the leash, as she'd been since she was ten weeks old. It was the very first time I started to understand the feeling of what it might be like to have an assistance dog at your side. I went at my pace and did what I wanted rather than gauge my time to her tolerance level. She was silent and still as I stopped to examine each artifact and when I was ready to move on, I'd look down and she'd look up—each of us reassuring the other—and together

we'd navigate through the crowd to our next stop. Having her beside me as I enjoyed the show was one of the most comfortable and reassuring feelings I've ever experienced. Repetition and practice had begun to take on form and shape. My service puppy was maturing.

The sixteen months that Ruby and I spent together were full of fun and training and lots of laughter, and as all time with our animals, far too brief. With autumn came relinquishment. And, yes, those last few weeks leading up to her turn-in day were emotional. I'd hold her extra-tight and cry in her soft fur and inhale deeply, trying to store her scent in my soul. When the day came, it was difficult to hand the leash to her advanced trainer. But, at the same time, it felt very right.



A raiser and a Roo, saying goodbye and looking to the future.

A few days later, I received a kind e-mail from her advanced trainer and some photos soon after that. I looked through the photos into Ruby's eyes and at her body language, and I could tell right away that she was happy and adjusting well. With that assurance, my sadness disappeared and I've been nothing but excited ever since. Whatever path is meant for my Roo, she'll always be a part of me and I am heart-burstingly proud of the dog she has become.

Christine Gillow is a freelance writer who lives in Denver with her husband Jeff, and 13-year-old Kiva, a former NY ASPCA dog. You can read her blog, Raising Ruby, at servicepuppyruby.blogspot.com or contact her at pineypaw@gmail.com.