

# COMMUNITY

## Foster volunteers needed

More families needed for dog guide program

By Stephanie Hounsell  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

With a one-month-old who wouldn't sleep through the night, Milton residents Lynda and Ignatio Agüero developed a system familiar to many new parents.

"My husband and I took turns getting up in the night," Lynda said.

But it wasn't easy, especially when one of them was travelling.

"When I'm alone, it's like being a single parent," she said.

Even now, six-month-old Samson requires constant attention, although Lynda's thankful she can at least get a good night's sleep.

Nobody ever said taking care of a dog would be easy — particularly the house training part.

"It's like having kids," she said, laughing.

The Agüeros are foster parents with the Lions Foundation of Canada's Dog Guides program. Puppies spend their first year with a foster family to learn basic training and socialization while they grow.

At the end of that time, they're given back to the Lions Foundation and undergo rigorous training — the "pass" rate is about 75 per cent — to become companions for people who are blind, deaf, have medical or physical disabilities, have seizures and, most recently, have autism.

Up until recently, the Agüeros had two foster puppies — Samson, who's a yellow lab, and a half-lab, half-golden retriever named Waylen, whose time with the Agüeros was up a few weeks ago. He was returned to the Lions Foundation at just over a year old.

"(Samson) misses his buddy," Lynda said.

Before Samson and Waylen, the Agüeros had Nemo, who was placed with a man with vision loss.

As foster parents, the Agüeros have been



**REWARDING RELATIONSHIP:** Foster program members Lynda and Nacho Agüero enjoy time with guide dogs in training Waylen (left) and Samson. GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

taking Samson — and Waylen, when they had him — just about everywhere they go to get him used to different places and situations. When they go to a movie, so does Samson. When they go to a restaurant or shopping, Samson tags along.

"He has to live like he would if he was in service," Lynda said.

She and Ignatio also attend puppy classes with Samson about once a month and teach him the basics such as how to sit and stay. Dog food and vet bills are covered.

The Oakville-based organization is always seeking new volunteers for its foster puppy program, as well as temporary homes where the puppies can stay if, for example, their foster parents are going away for the weekend and can't take them along.

Waylen is now training to become part of the Autism Assistance Dog Guide program, in which kids aged four to 12 are matched with a companion, said Melissa Eckersley of Dog Guides Canada.

These dogs are tethered to their child and trained to solidly plant themselves if the child attempts to bolt — one of the safety concerns of autistic kids.

If Waylen isn't suitable, the Agüeros will have first crack at permanently adopting him.

People thinking about fostering a dog should first consider if they have the time, Eckersley said.

"They have to be able to dedicate a significant period of time — one year — to training and raising the dog," she said.

They also have to be able to say goodbye. Lynda knows first-hand that's the hardest part.

"When we give them up, we're bawling our eyes out. I'm always like, 'I don't know if I can do this again,' but I always do."

In the end it's worth it, knowing they've done something to help make someone else's life easier.

And there's nothing better than the affection of a furry friend, if only for a year.

"They're a joy to have around," Lynda said.

For an application to become a foster family, call 1-800-768-3030 or visit [www.dogguides.com](http://www.dogguides.com).

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