

Groomed for greatness

Foster family socializes puppy in training as seeing eye dog

JULIE CASPERSEN
News editor

They call it puppy love. For the past year, the Oda family has watched Amber grow from an ungainly golden retriever pup to a gorgeously regal dog. They brought her to their Markham house — already bouncing with three children and a year-old beagle named Susie — in May 1997, and now it's almost time for Amber to move on. Her stay with the Odas was always temporary, because Amber is no ordinary family pet; she's destined for a life of service. Amber is a guide dog in training, and Norma and Ron have spent more than a year getting her used to day-to-day life. "We treat her as if she was ours," said Norma, watching her hus-

band ruffle the feathered fur on Amber's exposed belly. But while Susie is a true pet (she sleeps on the floor and goes for afternoon walks in the park), Amber has special responsibilities. Norma walks the retriever along Hwy. 7 or Main St. Markham during the height of rush hour. The future seeing-eye dog needs to be able to step without hesitation over sidewalk grates with transport trucks whizzing past and car horns blaring. She must obey traffic lights, and stop for a red without sitting down. She needs to learn proper house manners, to relieve on a leash, and be exposed to as many different people and situations as possible. She loves boats, and has taken in a couple of hockey games at area arenas. During her time in Markham, Amber has paid numerous visits to various shops as well as Markville Shopping Centre where, after a bit of convincing, was allowing to ride on the "moveator" in Wal-Mart. (She has yet to try an escalator.)



Guide dog-to-be Amber, wearing her training jacket, plays in the grass with beagle Susie and foster owner Norma Oda. Photo by STEVE SOMERVILLE

Helpful hints

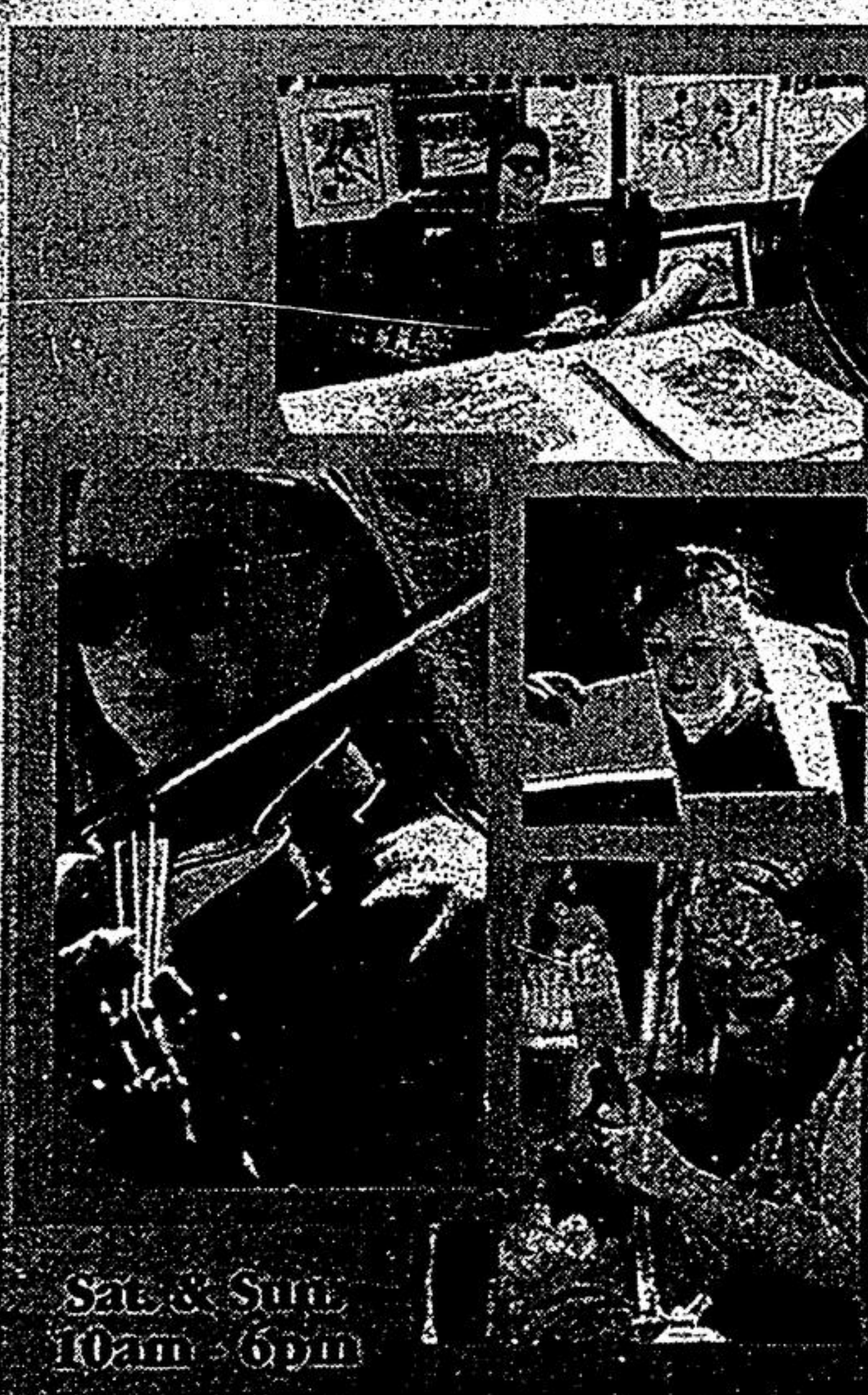
- It's always appropriate to offer your help, but the disabled person may wish to do it alone.
- If you are helping, and aren't sure exactly what to do, ask the expert — the person.
- Disabled is not dumb. If you have a question, ask the person, not the companion.
- Grabbing a blind person's cane is out, as is patting the guide dog.
- If guiding a blind person, your body motion is the guide, so let the person take your arm.
- Always identify yourself to a blind person as your voice may not be recognized.
- Advise a lone blind person of your arrival and departure from a room, especially when you are wearing soft-soled shoes.

band ruffle the feathered fur on Amber's exposed belly. Most shop owners are "neutral" about having Amber in their store. "Unfortunately there's been a couple of negative experiences," Norma said. "What's making it hard right now is that in the media there's all the dog-bite stories." Norma said the saving grace is the jacket Amber wears that identifies her as a guide dog in training. However, she doesn't have the rights of a registered guide dog. Stores and restaurants are not required by law to let her in their doors, and Norma has been turned away from some shops here in town. "You'll meet people who think you're doing a fantastic thing," she said. "And you'll meet people who say, 'Get that dirty mutt out

of here.'" According to Norma, Amber will make a great guide dog. "She's got a very teachable personality. She's very flexible. I think she'll adjust. She just wants to be loved." Taking on what is essentially a 24-hour-a-day, one-year volunteer commitment has been worth every dog-hair-covered rug and stoop-and-scoop. It's also taught the Oda children — aged 9, 10, and 12 — about giving back to their community, and let the Odas decide if a second dog will fit in with the family. Initially, Norma read about the foster puppy program in an *Economist & Sun* article in May 1997, and was moved to call Canine Vision Canada to see about joining. Now, a year later, their pup is

ready to return to Canine Vision's Oakville headquarters where she'll undergo obedience and specialized training. Canine Vision Canada is a project run by the Lions Foundation of Canada which launched the national guide dog training program in 1985. Amber is one of 125 seeing eye dogs in training living with foster families. Once the pups are between 10 and 16 months they're recalled, and the families have no contact with the dog until its graduation. "Once the puppies are through their socialization stage, they've been everywhere, they've done everything... and are ready for their training," said Natalie Comeau of the foster puppy program. Once recalled, the best seven

dogs are trained for six months, then paired with a blind client. Comeau said the last class had five students who were flown to Oakville from across Canada for a month-long stay. The newly-trained dogs will be rotated between each student until the perfect match is found. Then it's graduation time. Foster families are invited back to see their pup with its new owner. On that day "having given her up will be nothing," Norma said. Watching Amber finally on duty, and seeing her interact with a grateful new owner, will be worth the sacrifice of giving her up. "I hope we get to see it full circle." For more information about the foster puppy program, call 905-842-2891.



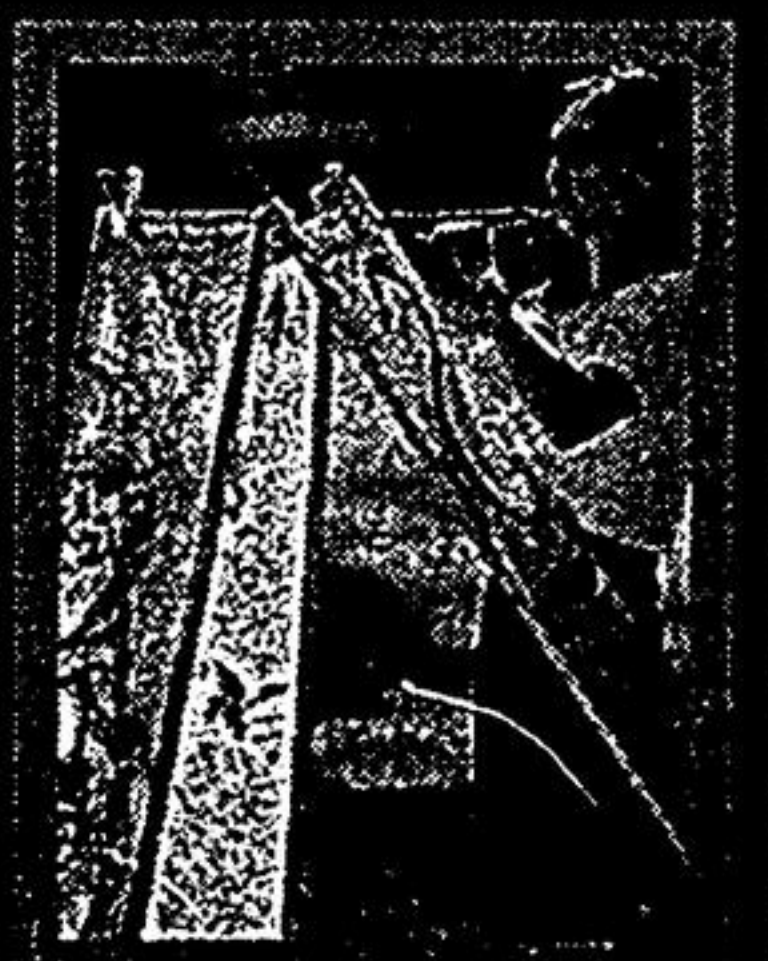
Left in the
Park 1998

It's Back and Better than Ever

Join us on July 18th and 19th for Ontario's Second largest Fine Art Show and Sale at Elgin Park, Uxbridge, Ontario

Admission
\$5.00 Adults
\$3.00 Seniors & Children (under 6 yrs free)

All proceeds to the
North Durham Health Services
Sponsored entirely by the TRIBUNE



Sat & Sun
10am - 6pm