

Author Elizabeth Wrenn raised a guide dog puppy not only as research for her novel but also because it was something she'd always wanted to do. She recently adopted Hakuna (shown here), who was "career changed" after suffering a severe knee injury.

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And Now I See

As she prepares a puppy to be a guide dog, a writer secretly finds life in art and art in life.

By Roxanne Hawn

When the family cat slips into a kitchen cabinet, Deena—a middle-aged mother of three with a nest well on its way to being empty—reaches in to retrieve him and winds up wedged against the lazy Susan. “How did I end up here?” Deena wonders. “Not here in the cupboard, but here as the owner of a cat, much less a fat, white Persian cat. I’m a dog person.” Soon after this revelation, she decides to raise a guide dog as a distraction from a daily life of motherhood, marital strife and menopause.

K-9 Eyes assigns Heloise, a 10-week-old yellow Lab, to Deena. On the drive home, the puppy yelps all the way. She scares the aforementioned cat into hiding on top of the refrigerator, anoints the floor four times between dinner and bedtime and whines all night long. The next day, she leaves a stinky pile in the bedroom closet, throws up (then re-consumes) her breakfast, snacks from the litter box and nibbles on the kitchen cabinets. So much for the first 24 hours!

Deena isn't real. Neither is Heloise. They are the heroines of Elizabeth Wrenn's first novel, *Around the Next Corner* (NAL/Penguin), which is the often funny, occasionally weepy tale of a woman's second coming-of-age. Fortunately, says Wrenn with a laugh, "No one in my life was as bad as anyone in my book."

Wrenn's Inspiration

A handful of "Oprah" episodes inspired Wrenn to think about this midlife shift. According to the author, the idea came to her "all at once, a lightning bolt strike of the muse." As she explains, "What if, I wondered, a woman who'd lost herself in her roles of wife and mother learned some new lessons about pack behavior, trust, unconditional love, loss and—most importantly—about herself by raising a service puppy?"

Initially, Wrenn thought she could gather the information she needed by simply interviewing other women who had raised guide dogs, so she attended local puppy-raiser meetings and asked lots of questions. That lasted four months and six chapters. Then she realized she needed to actually tackle it herself. This wasn't a completely new idea, since raising a guide dog puppy was already on her personal "life list" of things she wanted to do at some point.

In June 2003, she welcomed eight-week-old Lucca, a neutered male yellow Lab. She told just two people—her husband and the local guide-dog group leader—the truth about her motivation. "I didn't tell people that I was writing a novel," Wrenn says. "I felt it would take the wind out of my sails ... I also didn't have any particular expectation that it would actually get published. Though I didn't think the guide dog raising was going to be

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© Courtesy of Guide Dogs for the Blind

that huge, it turned out to be a very important part," she adds, laughing. Lucca certainly taught Wrenn what she needed to know for the book, but he also gave her keen insights into life and leadership, patience and persistence. (He's now a working guide dog, assisting a blind mother in Georgia.)

Lucca's Lessons

Wrenn, a native of Boulder, Colorado, hadn't had a puppy in the house for 20 years when Lucca came into her life. He indeed chewed the kitchen cabinets, but not so badly that you notice until Wrenn points out the gouges in the hickory. He also damaged door molding, which was replaced after he returned to the Guide Dogs for the Blind's Oregon training campus in September 2004.

Wrenn says Lucca loved chewing sticks and leaning against her. He quickly learned to sit if he'd done something wrong so Wrenn could praise him for doing something right. She reserved the word "No" for serious transgressions "so that it carried more weight," instead using "hmmm" or "oops" as marker words for inappropriate behavior. Along the way, Wrenn

became a better leader. "I learned things that I should have been doing the whole time, but you can't possibly learn it all," she says. "Just like your first child, your first guide dog doesn't get the most skilled parenting or training."

Take the constant contact. "I would encourage him to be near me but not touch me," Wrenn explains. "He was a leaner, and he'd put a paw on my foot; people think that's cute, that dogs just want contact. Sometimes it is, but sometimes it's 'You need me now,' 'Look at me,' 'Deal with me,' 'I don't care what you're doing,' and *that* you want to nip in the bud."

Wrenn also learned about the way a pack functions: If a leader is down for some reason, another takes on the role. "We become their pack," she says, "and if we don't assume the role of pack leader, they will. And that causes problems. That's the core thing I wanted Deena to learn. This woman who had spent the majority of her life doing for other people needed to step into her own shoes and say, not necessarily, 'I'm the leader of this family,' but, 'I'm the leader of my life.'"

Wrenn taught Lucca to bond with and trust people, which lays the foundation

for guide work. "Lucca was not a bold personality at all," Wrenn explains. "So when he was in the position of having to be a leader, it was just horrible for him. He tried to do it, but he was terrified." Fueled by one another's uncertainty, Wrenn and Lucca struggled until she learned to fake it, pretending to be confident even when she wasn't—which is a lot like parenting, she jokes.

Lucca hung out under Wrenn's desk as she wrote. Even that simple task, sitting still for long periods of time, was work for them both. Wrenn adjusted her writing schedule to match the pup's attention span. She also took him on outings to socialize him to a variety of situations, including grocery stores, shopping malls, baseball games and buses. Wrenn carefully controlled Lucca's contact with other dogs, as his submissive tendencies caused him to go belly-up almost instantly.

Unlike writing, which is a solitary pursuit, raising a guide dog requires a high degree of human contact; nothing attracts more attention than a cute puppy with near-perfect manners, wearing a little green in-training coat. "It really was the perfect vehicle for Deena, who was feeling invisible, to be launched out into the world, because you can't avoid it," Wrenn says.

Much as Wrenn's writing group supported her creatively, local puppy raisers helped her with practical matters and, unwittingly, with stories. Several of their funniest experiences ended up in the book, such as the time a fellow puppy raiser became so engrossed at the movies that she didn't notice her puppy had slipped his collar and wandered several rows away, licking his way along the sticky floor.

The most frightening of Wrenn's real-life encounters happened in her front yard, of all places. Guide dogs are trained to relieve themselves while on-leash only on command. One night, during Lucca's last trip out before bed, Wrenn saw eyes glinting in the darkness and heard growling. Two neighborhood dogs, one with a history of aggression toward both people and pets, approached.

"I had to protect Lucca," she says. "That was my first and foremost thought, so I put myself between them and him. Bless his heart, I could really tell he just didn't

know what the right thing to do was." She then backed toward the house, still shielding Lucca with her body. "He was probably 50 pounds then," she says. "I could have picked him up, but in the time I would have been hefting him, they might have seen a moment of vulnerability. I didn't want to turn my back on them."

On to Higher Education

Most guide dog puppies are called back for formal training on a regular schedule, riding to West Coast training facilities in motor homes. A few, like Heloise in the book, are called back unexpectedly and travel by plane. When the time came for Lucca to return to the Oregon training center, Wrenn and her husband chose to drive him. "At the exact same time as parents all over the country were taking their kids to college campuses, we were taking our dog," says Wrenn.

Seeing the beautiful, well-maintained facilities and the attentive staff made the transition somewhat easier. "The dogs in their runs at the Guide Dogs school have little colorful toddler playsets, like those you see in people's backyards. Every run has one, so they can climb on it and slide down it," Wrenn explains. "And they have a roommate, so it's like their dorm room ... the dogs in their runs jumped up, I swear, and said, 'Hey! Hi!' And Lucca said, 'Hi! I'm new!' There was so much excitement."

Of course, Wrenn cried when they left Lucca for good, and the healing is ongoing. "I think about him every day," she says. Nonetheless, she has the satisfaction of a job well done. Wrenn says she saw "how much he grew, both emotionally and mentally. How much he came into his own. He was an absolutely stellar dog when he left us."

Choices and Lessons

Much of the novel hinges on choices characters make. In her life, Wrenn chose to stay home with her daughter, to live as a writer, to raise Lucca. She chose to tell a story of one woman learning about love that starts with puppy breath and ends with letting go. The dog's progress was her progress, and, step by step, they succeeded. Serendipitously, Wrenn met her literary

agent immediately before Lucca's recall to campus. While Lucca was in final guide-dog training, she was in final revisions. The month Lucca graduated, a publisher accepted her book for publication.

Wrenn, 49, says she's mostly relearning lessons at this stage in life. And Lucca reminded her of one key truth: Everything is about the absence or presence of love. "Fear is absence of love. Trust is presence of love," Wrenn explains. "So, really, bottom line, it all comes down to love. Dogs get that. They don't even need to think about it. That's just it for them." ☺

Connections

Guide dog schools across the country offer similar puppy-raising opportunities. The American Foundation for the Blind has compiled the following contact list:

California

Guide Dogs for the Blind
San Rafael, CA
800.295.4050
guidedogs.com

Michigan

Leader Dogs for the Blind
Rochester, MI
888.777.5332
leaderdog.org

New Jersey

The Seeing Eye
Morristown, NJ
800.539.4425
seeingeye.org

New York

Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind
Smithtown, NY
800.548.4337
guidedog.org

Oregon

Guide Dogs for the Blind
Boring, OR
503.668.2100
guidedogs.com