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## Our canine carers

*The dog has been esteemed and loved by all the people on earth and he has deserved this affection for he renders services that have made him man's best friend.* – Alfred Barbou<sup>[1]</sup>

Our canine carers come from The South African Guide-Dogs Association for the Blind (SAGA), established in 1953 by Gladys Evans, herself blind, and her dog Sheena.<sup>[2]</sup> Visit [http://www.guidedog.org.za/website\\_who\\_we\\_are\\_content/54](http://www.guidedog.org.za/website_who_we_are_content/54) to meet this lovely lady (recently deceased) and learn how South Africans had to be educated about these special animals!

SAGA, celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, trains guide dogs for the blind and partially sighted. Since 1993, it has also undertaken the training of 'service' and 'social' dogs,<sup>[3]</sup> the former to assist people with disabilities, the latter to provide companionship to children with autism, dyslexia and Down's syndrome<sup>[3]</sup> (go to <http://www.guidedog.org.za> and click on the YouTube link to view *Sweet mama dog interacting with a beautiful child with down's syndrome*).<sup>[4]</sup>

SAGA breeds its own Labrador and Golden Retrievers, breeds which 'most consistently exhibit a necessary stability, initiative, docility, ability, aplomb, and stubbornness'.<sup>[2]</sup> To this might be added high intellect and work ethic plus, as one blogger writes, 'compassionate love for even people with disabilities'.

SAGA exists to train guide dogs for the blind and partially sighted. Based in Johannesburg, with a satellite unit in Cape Town, SAGA has trained 2 260 guide dogs, 87 service dogs and 35 social dogs since its inception.<sup>[5]</sup>



The concept of the service dog is attributed to Dr Bonita Bergin, who founded Assistance Dogs International.<sup>[6]</sup> The Bergin University of Canine Studies<sup>[7]</sup> is 'an educational and research-oriented organisation focusing on dogs and their positive synergistic relationship with humans ... the dog ... thinks, feels and reacts in ways very much like humans, hence its unique ability to fit into human society'.<sup>[8]</sup> Bergin, notably, is an educationist with postgraduate qualifications in early childhood education.

According to the biologist Coppinger, dogs chose, some 15 000 years ago, to cohabit with man (!), exploiting human left-overs as a food source and evolving from wild wolves to hunting assistants and guards of settlements and livestock.<sup>[9]</sup> Today there are over 400 recognised breeds of *Canis lupus familiaris*, and the dog's status as a pet and integral family member is unquestioned.

Dog owners, particularly the elderly and disabled for whom the dog 'catalyses social interaction and offers uncensored spontaneity', enjoy better mental and physical health,<sup>[10]</sup> recover more easily from stroke, myocardial infarction, and cancer,<sup>[11]</sup> and have a lower mortality rate following myocardial infarction.<sup>[12]</sup>

Dogs truly confirm their reputation as 'man's best friend' as canine carers.<sup>[13,14]</sup> Beyond guide dogs that see for the blind, the categories of service and assistance dogs are legion and growing: they are walking sticks and props for the lame; assist with mobility in developmentally challenged children; 'do' for their wheelchair-bound owners (fetching and carrying, turning lights on and off, opening and closing doors, selecting groceries off the shelf, diving into the dryer to retrieve laundry, assisting with dressing/undressing and, suitably harnessed, hauling along the wheelchair). There are hearing dogs that respond to the sound of the doorbell or the whistle of a boiling kettle, dogs trained to detect impending seizures in epileptics and hypoglycaemia in diabetics,<sup>[15]</sup> to socialise the mentally challenged and bestow confidence and empowerment, and to comfort those with post-traumatic stress disorder and psychiatric illness.

Agencies such as SAGA breed their own puppies, each fostered with a volunteer puppy-raiser or -walker. A puppy that proves it possesses the ideal personality and courage, having learned about

20 commands by 12 - 14 months, proceeds to advanced training at the hands of an expert for 6 - 12 months. Once the dog is matched with his or her owner, a period of residential training and bonding follows for both. Trainer, owner and canine carer then settle into the owner's home and neighbourhood for about a week's orientation and socialisation with the family, vet, shopkeepers, and public transport providers.

Although such highly specialised training is expensive – with an all-up cost of R80 000 partly defrayed by a R10 000 sponsorship per dog – the owner pays only R100 for the residential training, and R5 for the dog (sealing a contract that ensures the dog's well-being and regular veterinary check-ups).<sup>[3]</sup>

The working life of these carers is 7 - 8 years, after which they grow old 'sleeping in the sun' in the homes of their owners,<sup>[2]</sup> or are re-homed, SAGA fortunately having a waiting list for the 'retirees'.<sup>[3]</sup>

So, the next time you meet a friendly Lab outside your regular shopping centre, attached to her human charge and sporting the characteristic harness or red jacket, be sure to rattle some coins into the collection tin (or make a donation, or sponsor a dog, or make a bequest) and receive a delighted smile ... in the form of a wagging tail.

*If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. It is the principal difference between a dog and a man. – Mark Twain<sup>[16]</sup>*

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