



Kids' Community

Dogs Help Youth See Themselves In A New Way

(NAPSA)—Young people are learning responsibility and gaining self-confidence in a 4-H program where they train Seeing Eye dogs.

More than 70 4-H clubs in New Jersey and the surrounding region are training 800 dogs in a unique partnership with The Seeing Eye—an organization that enhances the independence of blind people. Consistent with the 4-H tradition of youth leadership, the young people, not their parents, are responsible for the dogs.

The youth teach the dogs basic obedience, socialize them with people, and expose them to situations they might encounter as Seeing Eye dogs.

Seventeen-year-old Esther Middlekauff, president of the Ocean County 4-H Club in New Jersey, is raising her sixth dog for the program. She leads the club members in activities and serves as a mentor for kids who are not familiar with the responsibility necessary for working with these special dogs.

“Training can be hard,” she said, “but it helps us all build character and persistence.”

Working with the dogs can also help give youth a sense of purpose. Ezekiel Gonzalez, a resident at the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission's Fresh Start community home, had few chances to show his true potential. That all changed when he met Spock.

Spock is a 1-year-old Labrador retriever that Ezekiel, 18, and the other youth at the home are helping foster for the Ocean County 4-H Club. Ezekiel is learning many personal lessons working



Training dogs that will work with blind people is helping young people learn responsibility.

with the dog. “Spock shows me how to be patient,” he said. “He looks to me for support and to keep him safe.”

“For these boys to take care of something of their own gives them hope. Spock is a very helpful addition to both our residents and staff,” said Michael Dindak, Fresh Start superintendent.

The 4-Hers appreciate the value of their work, even though it can be difficult. “Sometimes a good thing is hard to do,” said Esther. “But I know that my dog will help someone and that is their job.”

4-H is a community of young people across America learning leadership, citizenship and life skills. To learn more about 4-H, visit 4husa.org.