

Inmates train guide dogs to help blind

By DAWN THOMPSON

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ROCKWELL CITY — Puppies can bring a smile to nearly anyone's face.

However, puppies are much more than amusing, wiggling bundles of fur at North Central Correctional Facility in Rockwell City. They enable the inmates there to give to others what they themselves live without — freedom.

This gift was evident when Katie Kress, 15, of Stillwater, Minn., and her guide dog, Faith, visited the minimum security prison as part of the annual Leader Dog Puppy Day evaluation and celebration on a recent afternoon.

"What it means to me to have Faith," Kress told a crowd of more than 200 guests, "is there are more accomplishments ahead of me than I would have otherwise ever known. She is my best friend, and truly a light in the darkness. These dogs, they make us feel safe and protected while giving us independence in our own hometowns."

Raised at the prison, Faith is one of 101 dogs that have passed through the gates in the past six years as part of the puppy-raising program with Leader Dogs for the Blind, a nonprofit organization based in Rochester, Mich., that trains guide dogs for the sightless.

Specially bred Labrador retrievers and golden retriever puppies are brought to North Central Correctional Facility where they spend a year with an assigned inmate who teaches

them basic obedience and exposes them to various situations to prepare them to become guide dogs. Food and care for the pups is funded through private donations and support from the Lions Clubs of Iowa.

In the end, not every canine is suited to become a guide dog, but the puppies raised in the program at the prison have a 90 percent success rate.

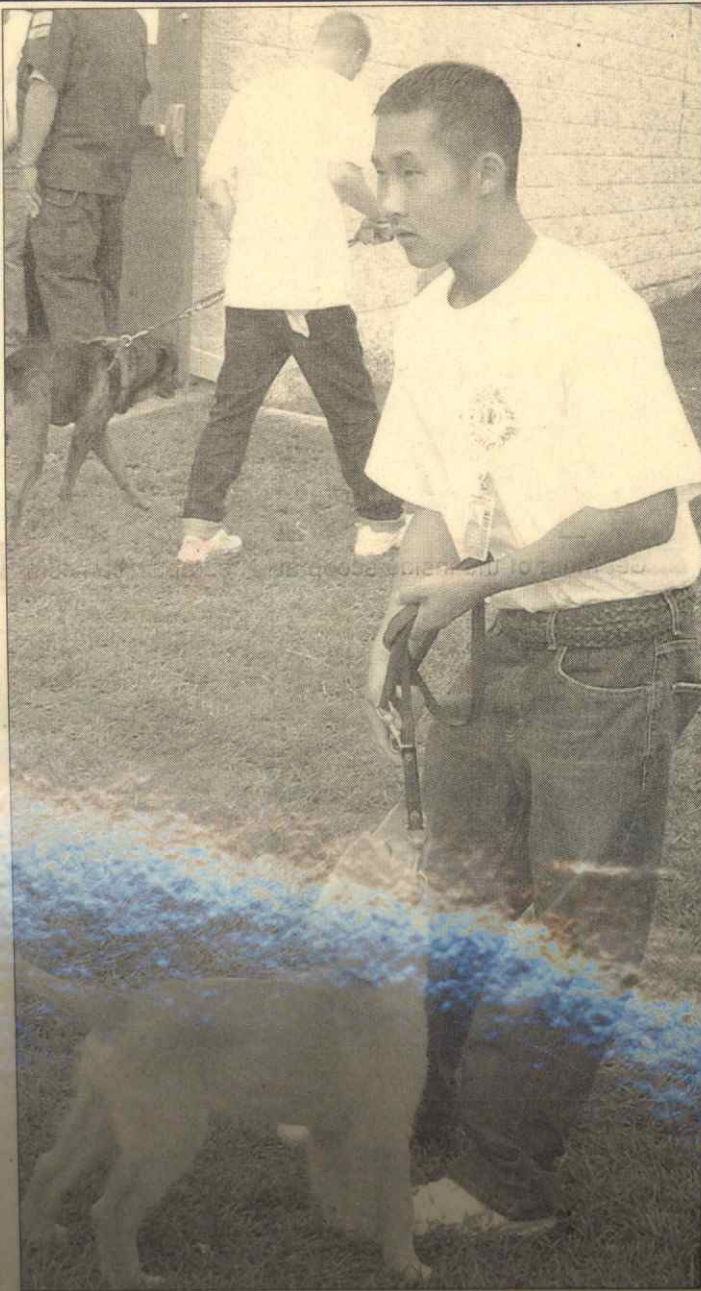
"Having Faith is better than anything I have ever imagined," Kress said. "She is great, and so smart. Sometimes it's like she knows what we're going to do before even I do."

Kress is the youngest person Leader Dog has matched with a guide dog. A trial situation, she must have adult supervision when she is working with Faith until she turns 16. Even with such limitations, said her mother, Sue Kress, Katie feels a sense of empowerment.

"She is so very happy," she said. "Katie has so much more independence and freedom."

Continuing the puppy raising program is important not only because of people like Kress who the dogs go on to help, said Warden Jim McKinney, but also for the lessons learned by the inmates.

"We do this program not just to raise Leader Dogs," he said, "but to teach responsibility and how to give back. What we try to say to the offenders is you are doing a service. It is not about you. To help somebody, you have to learn to give. Once you start to take the focus off yourself by helping someone else, you begin to realize the good person you can be."



AP PHOTO

Inmate Eric Miller talks with visitors at the North Central Correctional Facility Sept. 30 in Rockwell City while golden retriever puppy Trooper tries to get his attention. Trooper will be the second dog Miller has been assigned as part of the puppy raising program at the prison. Specially bred Labrador retrievers and golden retriever puppies are brought to the facility where they spend a year with an inmate who teaches them basic obedience and exposes them to various situations to prepare them to become guide dog.