

GOOD NEWS

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Best friends for the visually impaired

Guide dogs allow owners to live life on their own

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CALGARY HERALD

At first, Norma Bastidas thought her son Karl was just clumsy.

When he started to miss the puck during his hockey games, she convinced herself his glasses were probably fogging up under his mask.

But when teachers noticed Karl struggling to distinguish words and colours on the blackboard, Bastidas knew something was very wrong.

Her suspicions were confirmed when doctors diagnosed him with Cone Rod Dystrophy, a rare genetic condition that typically results in blindness.

"He will lose his sight — it's a matter of how soon and how much," said Bastidas of her 14-year-old son, who unlike his friends is unlikely to drive a car and will almost certainly require a cane to navigate his surroundings.

But Bastidas is hopeful Karl will still have a bright future with the help of guide dog — and Karl is excited at the prospect of a furry companion that will guarantee him independence into adulthood.

That's obvious as he hugs, rolls on the floor and is treated to sloppy kisses from Chloe, a Black Labrador puppy that is one of several currently being trained to help Albertans.

Five cuddly canines enjoyed a playful romp with vision impaired children like Karl on Thursday as part of an upcoming comedy fund-



Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald

It's love at first sight for Rosie McDougald, 6, and five month-old Finn as the pair take part in a meet and greet at Christ Church in southwest Calgary on Thursday. Visually impaired youngsters had a chance to mix with young dogs being trained by the Alberta Guide Dogs society.

raiser to support medical research into finding a cure for degenerative eye diseases.

By the time Karl will own a dog like Chloe, odds are he won't be able to see it.

"We talk about it and he feels that losing his sight isn't the worst thing that could happen," said his mother. "He chooses not to see limits in what he can do — freedom is very important to him and he's very happy about the idea of a dog."

Guide dogs begin their training

It gives her hope — and the opportunity to succeed in life ... all on her own.

NATASHA MCDUGALD

at about eight weeks of age when they are placed with foster families who expose the canines to as many different environments as possible, whether it's a crowded grocery store

or noisy theatre.

It costs about \$40,000 to raise one of the dogs from an inquisitive puppy to a full-fledged working pooch. The animals are supplied to youths as early as 13 years of age.

Natasha McDougald is grateful for the opportunities a guide dog could bring to her daughter Rosie, who was born deaf and is progressively losing her eyesight to a genetic disorder called Usher's Syndrome.

The six-year-old has already cleared one hurdle — her hearing

was restored with a double cochlear implant — but doctors fear the little girl could lose her vision by the age of 10.

"It's absolutely horrible to watch your daughter lose her sight and know that she's aware of what is happening to her," said McDougald. "She knows she's different and she'll say, 'I don't want to be like this.'"

But like the Bastidas family, McDougald is optimistic that doctors will soon find a way to reverse progressive vision disorders.

There are hopeful signs: Just last month, the Canadian Institute of Health Research and the Foundation For Fighting Blindness announced a \$2.4 million, five-year study that will examine the role of stem cells in restoring eyesight.

But until scientists see a long-awaited medical breakthrough, she's comforted by the idea that Rosie can lead a relatively normal life with the help of a guide dog.

"It gives her hope — and the opportunity to succeed in life, to go to university and do it all on her own. It's a very powerful thing," said McDougald.

McDougald hopes people will support Comic Vision, a fundraiser taking place in cities across Canada to raise money for Foundation Fighting Blindness.

The Calgary event is slated for April 29 at the Hotel Arts and will feature four comedians, including entertainer Mike Macdonald.

More information can be found at www.comicvision.ca.

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