

CALGARY **SUN**

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Michael Platt

Canine companion will prove to be Rosie's guiding light

By the time she has a guide dog of her own, the only thing five-year-old Rosie McDougald will clearly see are those in her mind.

Watching Rosie grinning and giggling with glee as five-month-old Nelson bathes her cheeks in kisses, you get the impression the young black Labrador puppy will be a big part of those memories eight years from now, when she turns 13.

"He's a goofy puppy — his nose is damp and moist," says Rosie.

She's already chosen a name for her future Labrador helper — Licker — and made a choice between yellow, brown and black.

"I want a dog that's the same colour as Nelson," she says without hesitation.

The precocious girl with a gap-toothed grin is gradually going blind, her eyesight falling victim to Usher's syndrome, a rare, incurable genetic condition that causes hearing and vision loss.

Eventually, all the young girl will see is a small pinprick of light, her peripheral vision

collapsing like a dark tunnel, and she'll need more help than the white cane she currently walks with.

Thirteen is the youngest age at which a blind person can obtain a guide dog, due to the commitment and bond.

Rosie can't wait — for the dog, that is.

She dreads the reason she needs an animal helper.

Her mother, Natasha McDougald, says Rosie knows she is losing her sight and her hearing, and the usually happy girl sometimes grows emotional with worry.

"She takes it really hard," says Natasha.

"She says, 'I don't want to be blind; I don't want to be deaf; I don't want to use a cane.'

"That's why the dog is so important — it gives her something to look forward to, to make her feel special."

While there's still nothing that can be done to help Rosie keep her eyesight, doctors have helped her recover a large degree of hearing through cochlear implants.

Born unable to hear the roar of a jet engine at close range, Rosie can now hear birds sing, and a dog's bark.

Not that Nelson makes a peep — the young lab, at an age when most puppies would be yelping, growling and generally acting the furry fool, Nelson is controlled, calm and only occasionally distracted by new things.

He's a pioneer in Calgary, one of the first five dogs trained in the city under a new program run by Alberta Guide Dog Services.

Until a few weeks ago, all guide dogs in the city were trained in B.C.

Now, a handful of pups —



JIM WELLS/SUN MEDIA

Five-year-old Rosie McDougald gets a kiss from Nelson, a five-month-old Labrador puppy who is in training to be a guide dog. Rosie is at the centre of an upcoming fundraiser called Comic Vision, set to be held May 7 at the Blackfoot Inn, to benefit the Foundation Fighting Blindness.

there'll soon be eight in all — are living with volunteer foster families in Calgary, learning how to handle the basics of life, including escalators, sidewalks and the LRT.

Each animal costs about \$40,000 to fully train, and at 14 months, they return to B.C. for the most intense part of the program, a six-month school with qualified guide dog instructors.

It's hoped the entire program will some day be done here in Alberta.

It's also hoped that the condition causing Rosie's blindness might be cured in the near future — new research into stem cell technology shows great promise, and scientists predict sight will be restored to some blind people

within a decade or two.

Natasha and Rosie are devoted to finding such a cure — both are promoting the upcoming comedy fundraiser, Comic Vision, being held May 7 at the Blackfoot Inn.

An annual event in cities like Toronto and Vancouver, Comic Vision raises money for the Foundation Fighting Blindness.

The Calgary event, starting at 6:30 p.m., features four comedians, including local laugh-artist Jebb Fink, as well as prizes, including a trip to the Mayan Riviera.

But as Rosie's family waits and hopes for a breakthrough, they understand the future as it stands includes gradual darkness, heartache and endless challenges.

But it also includes a puppy.

Actually, make that two puppies.

Because Rosie has to wait until her early teens to obtain a guide dog, the puppy-crazed girl has been promised a pet in the near future.

And just as she's clearly imagining her future guide, Rosie knows exactly what she wants her pet pup to be.

"The guide dog will be a black Labrador retriever, and the other one will be a fawn pug," says Rosie.

Why a pug? "Because they're small with wrinkly faces."

Of course. It couldn't be more clear.

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