

Mom's Best Friend



A Special Relationship

Mom's Best Friend describes the special attachment between Sally Hobart Alexander and her **dog guide**, Ursula.



Visiting dogs help cheer up people in hospitals.

Dogs were probably the first animals to be tamed and trained by people. Their original role may have been to help people hunt. Since then dogs have **mastered** such jobs as guiding blind and hearing-impaired people, rescuing accident victims, and visiting and cheering up hospital patients.

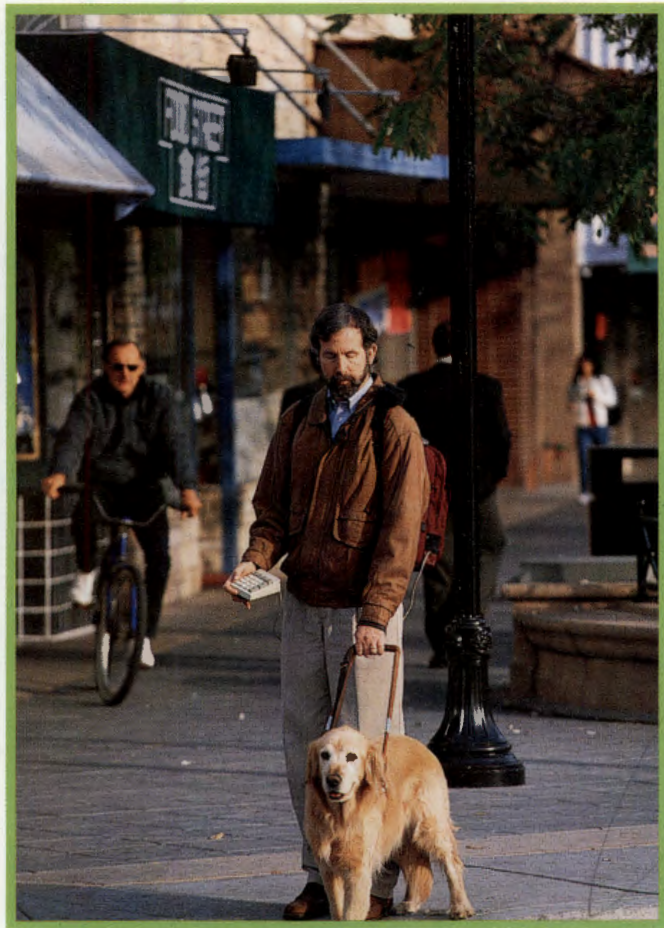
California
Standards

Standards to Achieve

Reading

- Discern main ideas (R2.3)
- Main problem/plot conflict (R3.2)

German shepherds and Labrador retrievers are popular dog guides for the blind.



Hearing dogs act as ears for the hearing-impaired.

You will read about the **obedience training** Ursula goes through to learn her job. But **memorizing** routines and learning to avoid **obstacles** is only half of that special relationship between dog and human. The other half is a dog's **instinct** for being a pal.

When both halves of the relationship fit together — the learning and the love — something nice happens. The trained helper becomes a best friend.



Many dogs are specially trained for finding and rescuing people.

Meet the Author

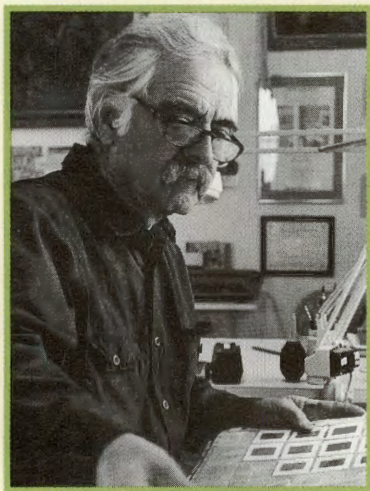
Sally Hobart Alexander

Sally Hobart Alexander grew up in rural Pennsylvania where she hiked, swam, and acted out stories with her friends. Alexander was in her twenties, teaching third grade in California, when she lost her eyesight to a rare disease. The next year, she was teaching again, at a center for the blind in Pittsburgh. Making up stories for her two children led Alexander to a career as a children's book author. Her first book, *Mom Can't See Me*, was also illustrated by photographer George Ancona.



Meet the Photographer

George Ancona



George Ancona grew up near Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York. He learned photography from his father, and began to draw by copying photographs. After traveling in Mexico, his parents' birthplace, Ancona studied in art school and worked as a designer for magazines and television. Since then he has kept busy as a photographer and author of children's books.

Internet



To find out more about Sally Hobart Alexander and George Ancona, visit Education Place. www.eduplace.com/kids

Mom's Best Friend

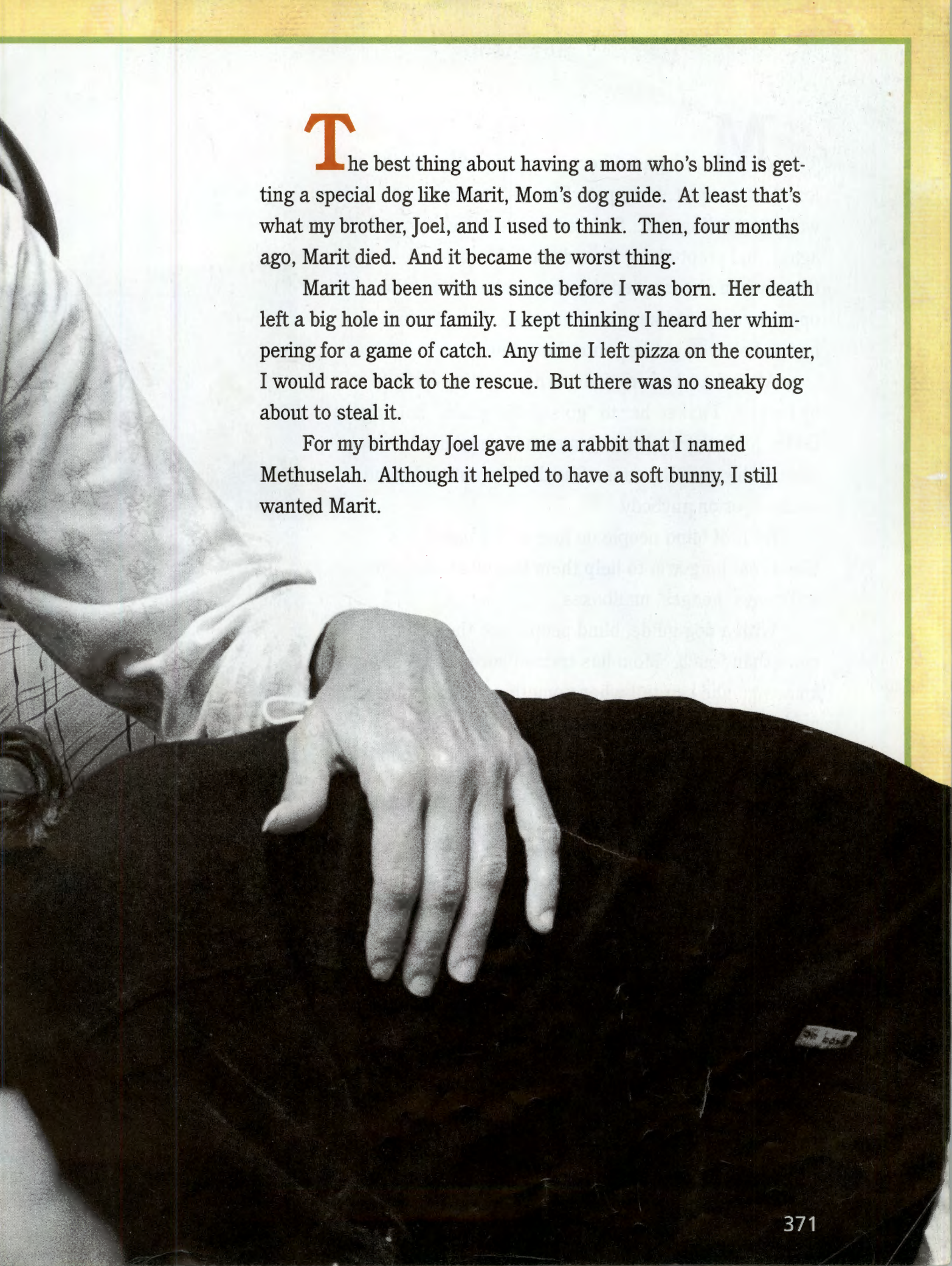


Sally Hobart Alexander
Photographs by George Ancona

Strategy Focus

As you read about Mom and her dog guide, Ursula, **monitor** your understanding of Ursula's training. If necessary, reread and use the photographs to **clarify**.





The best thing about having a mom who's blind is getting a special dog like Marit, Mom's dog guide. At least that's what my brother, Joel, and I used to think. Then, four months ago, Marit died. And it became the worst thing.

Marit had been with us since before I was born. Her death left a big hole in our family. I kept thinking I heard her whimpering for a game of catch. Any time I left pizza on the counter, I would race back to the rescue. But there was no sneaky dog about to steal it.

For my birthday Joel gave me a rabbit that I named Methuselah. Although it helped to have a soft bunny, I still wanted Marit.

Mom missed her even more. She didn't lose just a sweet, furry pet. She lost her favorite way of traveling, too. She had to use her cane again, and crept along the sidewalk like a snail. Once, when she crossed the street, she missed the opposite curb and kept walking toward the traffic. I had to holler to get her onto the sidewalk.

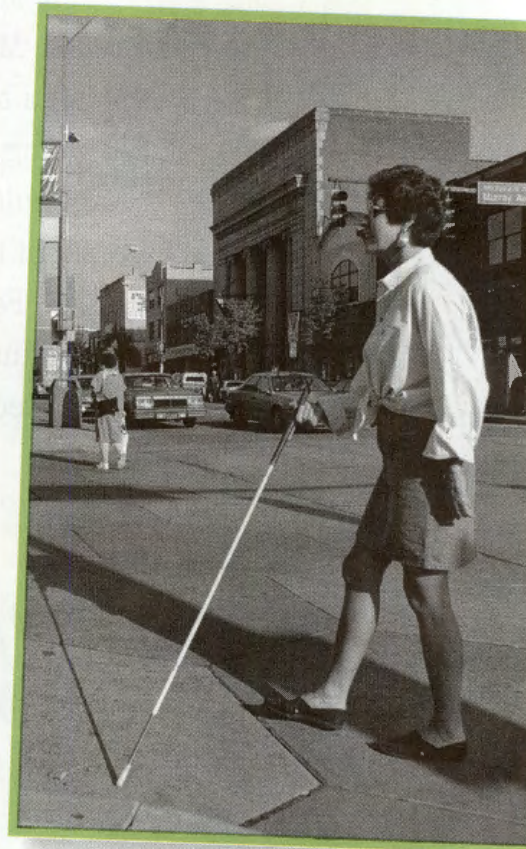
After that, I worried about her running errands by herself. I asked her to "go sighted guide," holding Dad's, Joel's, or my arm. Sometimes she did. But mostly she used the cane. She didn't want to depend on us — or on anybody.

A lot of blind people do fine with a cane. It's like a real long arm to help them feel what's around: walkways, hedges, mailboxes.

With a dog guide, blind people use their hearing more than touch. Mom has trained her ears. It's amazing: she can tell when something, like a movie marquee, is above her head, and when she passes a lamppost. She knows from the change in the sound of her footsteps.

In spite of Mom's special hearing, I worried. I was relieved when she decided to go back to The Seeing Eye for a new dog guide.

Before Mom left, I told her I wouldn't be able to love the new dog as much as Marit. Mom hugged me and said, "The night before you were born, I wondered how I could love a second child as much as your brother. Then you came, and like magic, I was just as crazy about you."





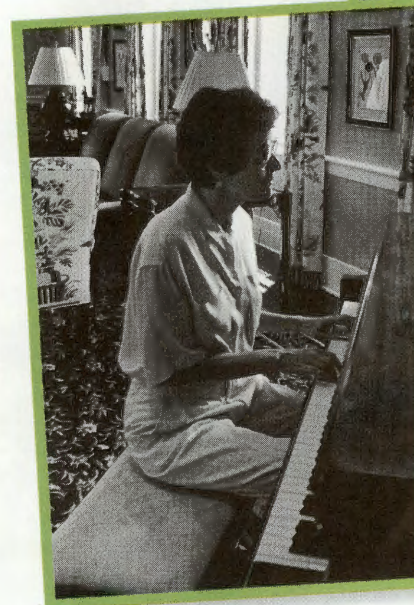
The Seeing Eye, in Morristown, New Jersey, was the first dog guide school in the United States. (Now there are nine others.) It trains German shepherds and Labrador and golden retrievers for three months. Then, for about a month, it teaches blind people to use the dogs.

When Mom arrived at The Seeing Eye, she was met by her instructor, Pete Jackson.

I missed Mom as much as I missed Marit, but at least Mom called every night. She also wrote letters and sent pictures.

Mom's first day was a cinch. She'd gone to Seeing Eye twelve years before to get Marit, and still remembered her way around. Usually when she's in a new place she has to move from room to room with her cane, memorizing the layout.

In the morning Mom walked with Pete Jackson so that he could check her pace. He wanted to choose the dog that would suit her best. Then she was free to play the piano, exercise . . . and worry. Would she get along with the new dog? Would they work well together?



The next day she got Ursula. What a strange name! The staff at Seeing Eye's breeding station had named Ursula when she was born. (Ursula's brothers and sisters were also given names starting with *U*.) Dog guides need a name right away so that Seeing Eye can keep track of the four hundred or so pups born each year. At two months of age, the pups go to Seeing Eye puppy-raising families to learn how to live with people. At fifteen months, they are mature enough to return to Seeing Eye for the three-month training program.

Dad said that Ursula means "bear." But in the pictures Mom sent, Ursula looked too pipsqueaky to be called bear. Mom explained that Seeing



Eye is now breeding some smaller dogs. They are easier to handle and fit better on buses and in cars.

My friends thought dog guides were little machines that zoomed blind people around. Until Mom went away, even I didn't understand all the things these dogs were taught.

But on Mom's first lesson in Morristown, Ursula seemed to forget her training. She veered on a street crossing and brushed Mom into a bush. Mom had to make her correct herself by backing up and walking around the bush. Then Mom praised her.



After ten practice runs with Pete, Mom and Ursula soloed. Ursula didn't stop at a curb, so Mom had to scold her and snap her leash, calling, "Pfui." Later Ursula crashed Mom into a low-hanging branch. "Ursula will have to start thinking tall," Mom said that night, "or I'll have to carry hedge clippers in my purse."

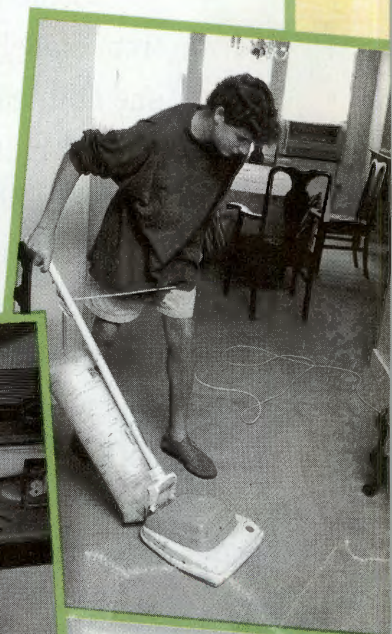
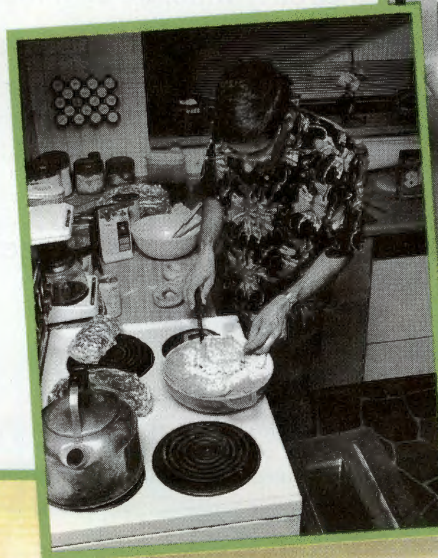
Even though Ursula had walked in Morristown a lot with Pete, she was nervous when Mom's hand was on the harness. Mom talked and walked differently. And Mom was nervous, too. Ursula moved so much faster than old Marit had, and Mom didn't trust her.

Every day Mom and Ursula made two trips. Every week they mastered new routes. Each route got longer and more complicated, and Mom had less time to learn it. Every night Mom gave Ursula obedience training: "Come. Sit down. Rest. Fetch." I thought she should try obedience training on Joel.

While Mom worked hard, Dad, Joel, and I went on with our normal lives — school, homework, soccer, piano, spending time with friends. We divided Mom's chores: Dad did the cooking, Joel, the vacuuming and laundry, and I did the dishes, dusting, weeding. The first two weeks were easy.

In a phone call Mom said that things were getting easier for her, too. "Remember how tough curb ramps have been for me?" she asked. "They feel like any other slope in the sidewalk, so I can't always tell that I've reached the street. Well, Ursula stopped perfectly at every ramp. And she guided me around, not under, a ladder and right past a huge parking lot without angling into it. But best of all, she actually saved my life.

A jackhammer was making so much noise that I couldn't hear whether the light was green or red. When I told Ursula, 'Forward!' she refused to move and kept me from stepping in front of a car. (Of course, Pete would have saved me if Ursula hadn't.)"



Mom barely asked about us. It was all Ursula, Ursula, Ursula! She seemed to be forgetting Marit, too. When a letter came a few days later, I was sure she didn't miss anyone.

Dear Bob, Joel, and Leslie,

Today Ursula and I faced several disasters! She tried hard to ignore a boxer dog who wanted to play. A few minutes later, a great Dane lunged out from nowhere, jumped all over her, and loped off. Ursula's instinct is to chase dogs, but she didn't move a paw after that one. As if the dogs weren't enough trouble, fire engine sirens went off. Ursula just strolled down the sidewalk.

Mostly, life is smooth here. Seeing Eye is a vacation — no cooking, no cleaning, lots of time to talk to new friends, like Dr. Holle, the veterinarian. And since I don't have many blind friends, it's a treat to be with my roommate and the twenty other students. We laugh about the same things, like the great enemy of the blind — trash collection day! Every twenty feet there's a garbage can reeking of pizza, hoagies, old cheese. Usually Ursula snakes me around these smelly obstacles. But sometimes the temptation to her nose wins out, and I have to correct her, all the while holding my own nose.

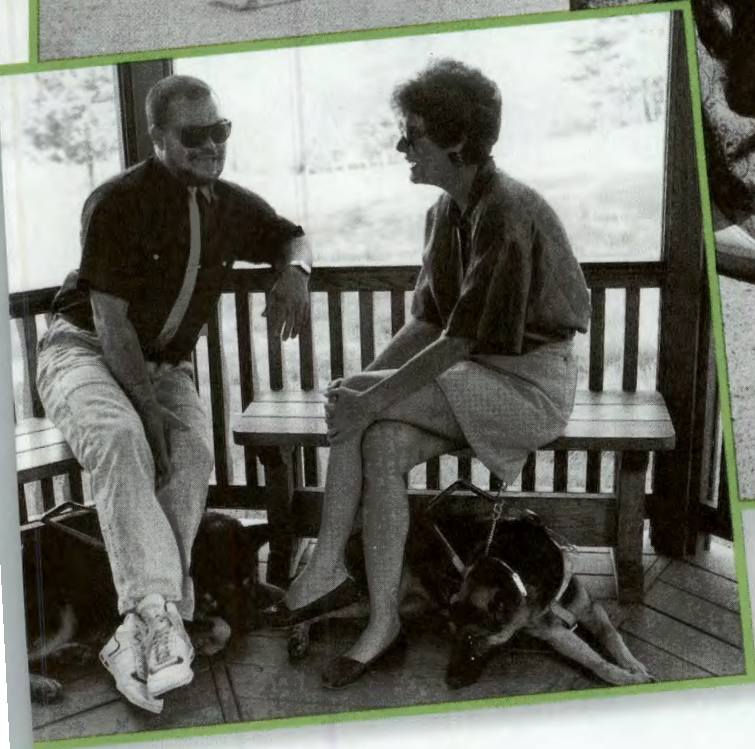
Some trainees really inspire me, like Julie Hensley, who became blind from diabetes at twenty-two. Even though she's been blind for twelve years, she still teaches horses to do stunts. She judges her location from a radio playing music in the center of the pen, and gallops around as fast as she ever did when she could see.

Bob Pacheco used to race motorcycles and hunt. Then, two years ago, when he was twenty-nine, he developed optic atrophy and became blind two months later. He took up fishing, swimming, even trapping. But something was missing. He couldn't get around quickly enough. After the first trip with his dog guide, he was overjoyed. "Sally!" He grabbed my hand. "I don't feel blind any more."

The dogs are wonderful, and the people here are very special. So are you.

Love, Mom





Well, life at home wasn't very wonderful or special. Dad ran out of the casseroles Mom had frozen ahead of time, and although his meals were okay, I missed Mom's cooking. Worse, the dishes kept piling up. I never knew Joel ate so much.

Then things got really bad. While Dad was teaching his American literature night class, Joel and I faced a disaster Mom and Ursula couldn't have dreamed of: the toilet bowl overflowed! We wiped the floor with towels. As Joel took the towels down to the washing machine, he found water dripping through the ceiling — all over the dining room table, all over the carpet. He ran for more towels, and I ran for the furniture polish and rug shampoo. When Dad got home, everything looked perfect. But I wrote a braille letter.

Dear Mom,
Come home soon. The house misses you.
Love,
Exhausted in Pittsburgh

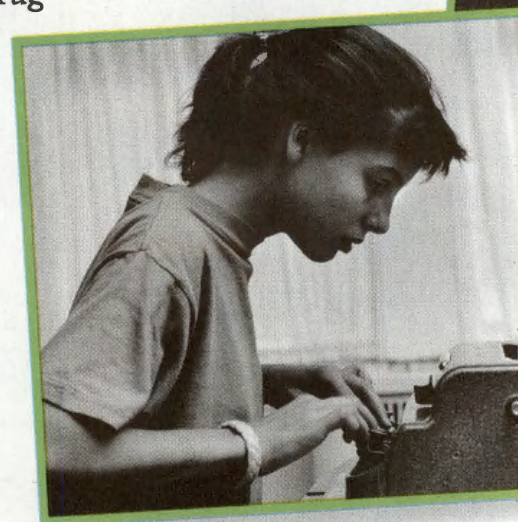
Mom wrote back.
Dear Exhausted,
Hang on. We'll be home to "hound" you Thursday.
Be prepared. When you see me, I will have grown four more feet.

Mom

I couldn't laugh. I was too tired and worried. What if I couldn't love Ursula? Marit was the best dog ever.

Soon they arrived. Ursula yanked at her leash and sprang up on me. She pawed my shoulders, stomach, and arms just the way Marit used to, nearly knocking me over. She leaped onto Joel, licking him all over. As she bounded up onto me again, I realized Mom was right. Like magic, I was crazy about this shrimpy new dog.

But by the end of the day, I had a new worry. Was *Ursula* going to love *me*? She seemed friendly enough, but keyed up, even lost in our house.



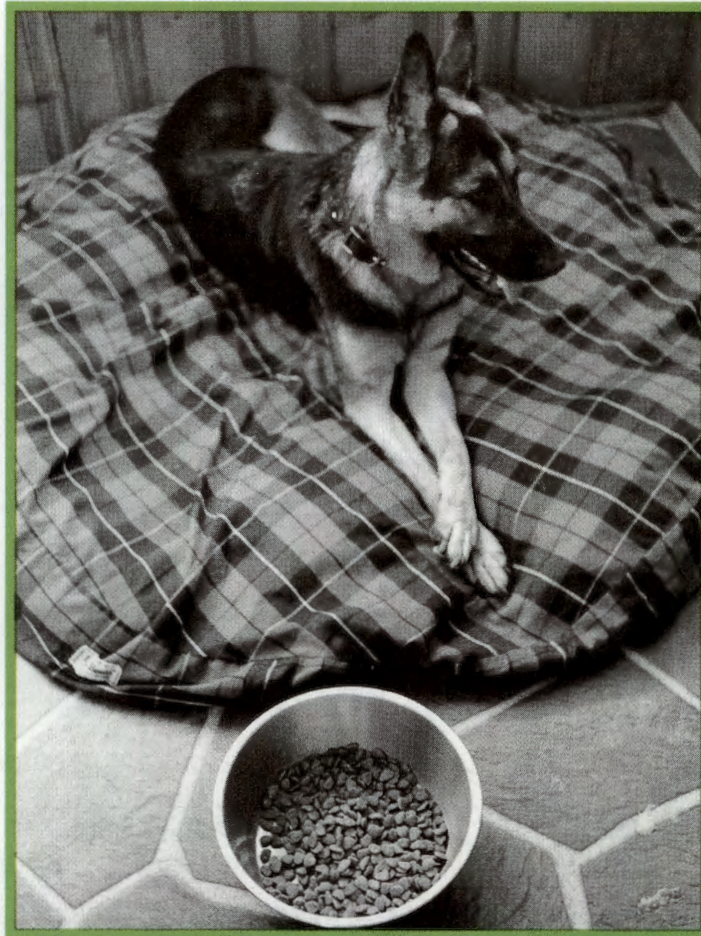


Mom explained that Ursula had already given her heart away three times: first to her mother, then to the Seeing Eye puppy-raising family, and finally to Pete. Mom said we had to be patient.

“Remember how Marit loved you, Leslie? When you were little, she let you stand on her back to see out the window. Ursula will be just as nuts about you. Love is the whole reason this dog guide business works.”

So I tried to be patient and watched Mom work hard. First she showed one route in our neighborhood to Ursula and walked it over and over. Then she taught her a new route, repeated that, and reviewed the old one. Every day she took Ursula on two trips, walking two or three miles. She fed her, groomed her, gave her obedience training. Twice a week Mom cleaned Ursula’s ears and brushed her teeth.





“I’m as busy as I was when you and Joel were little!” she said.

Mom and Ursula played for forty-five minutes each day. Joel, Dad, and I were only allowed to watch. Ursula needed to form her biggest attachment to Mom.

Mom made Ursula her shadow. When she showered or slept, Ursula was right there.

Still, Ursula didn’t eat well — only half the amount she’d been eating at Seeing Eye. And she tested Mom, pulling her into branches, stepping off curbs. Once she tried to take a shortcut home. Another time, because she was nervous, she crossed a new street diagonally.

Crossing streets is tricky. Ursula doesn’t know when the light is green. Mom knows. If she hears the cars moving beside her in the direction in which she’s walking, the light is green. If they’re moving right and left in front of her, it’s red.

I worried about Ursula's mistakes, but Mom said they were normal. She kept in touch with her classmates and knew that their dog guides were goofing, too. One kept eating grass, grazing like a cow. Another chased squirrels, pigeons, and cats. Still another always stopped in the middle of the street, ten feet from the curb. Once in a while her friends got lost, just like Mom, and had to ask for help.

Mom said it takes four to six months for the dogs to settle down. But no matter how long she and Ursula are teamed up together, Ursula will need some correcting. For instance, Ursula might act so cute that a passerby will reach out to pet her. Then Mom will have to scold Ursula and ask the person not to pet a dog guide. If people give Ursula attention while she's working, she forgets to do her job.

After a month at home, Ursula emptied her food bowl every time. She knew all the routes, and Mom could zip around as easily as she had with Marit.

"Now it's time to start the loneliness training," Mom said. She left Ursula alone in the house, at first for a short time while she went jogging with Dad. Ursula will never be able to take Mom jogging because she can't guide at high speeds.

Each week Mom increased the amount of time Ursula was alone. I felt sorry for our pooch, but she did well: no barking, no chewing on furniture.

Then Mom said Joel and I could introduce Ursula to our friends, one at a time. They could pet her when she was out of harness.

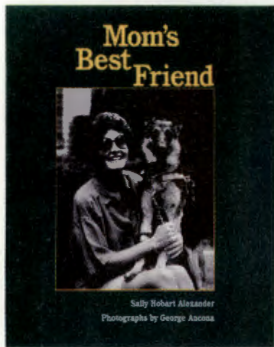
Every morning Ursula woke Joel and me. Every night she sneaked into my bed for a snooze.

Finally Mom allowed Joel and me to play with Ursula, and I knew: shrimpy little Ursula had fallen for us, and we were even crazier about her.

But we haven't forgotten Marit. Joel says that Ursula is the best dog alive. And I always say she's the best dog in this world.







Think About the Selection

1. What can you tell about the family in *Mom's Best Friend* from the way the family members manage while Mom is away?
2. What are other relationships in *Mom's Best Friend* besides the one between Mom and Ursula? Review the selection and report what you find.
3. What traits does a person need to be a good trainer of dog guides? Tell why you would or would not be good at this job.
4. Why do you think Ursula needs to form her strongest attachment to Mom?
5. Why do you think it takes so long for Ursula to settle down after moving to her new home?
6. Explain what Mom means when she says on page 381, "Love is the whole reason this dog guide business works."
7. **Connecting/Comparing** Compare the family described in this selection with Mariah's family in *Mariah Keeps Cool*. Think about how the members work together, and what is important to each family.



Expressing

Write an Audiotape Message

Suppose the family sent audiotape messages back and forth to stay in touch. Write the text of an audio greeting Mom might have sent, or write a message her family might have sent to her. Tell what the sender's day-to-day life is like. If you like, tape-record your message.

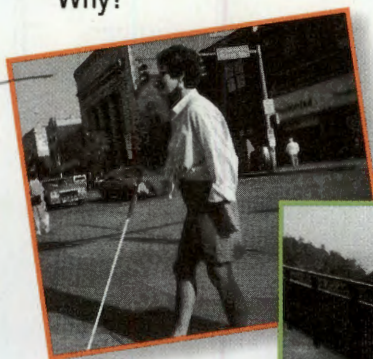
Tips

- Use language and a tone you might use in everyday speech.
- Add humor or emotion.

Science

Compare How Sounds Are Absorbed

Reread the description of Mom's hearing on page 372. What does it tell about how objects absorb, or muffle, sounds? Make a list of the different places Mom goes in the selection and note how sounds might be absorbed, or not, by her surroundings. Which places might be louder? Which might be quieter? Why?

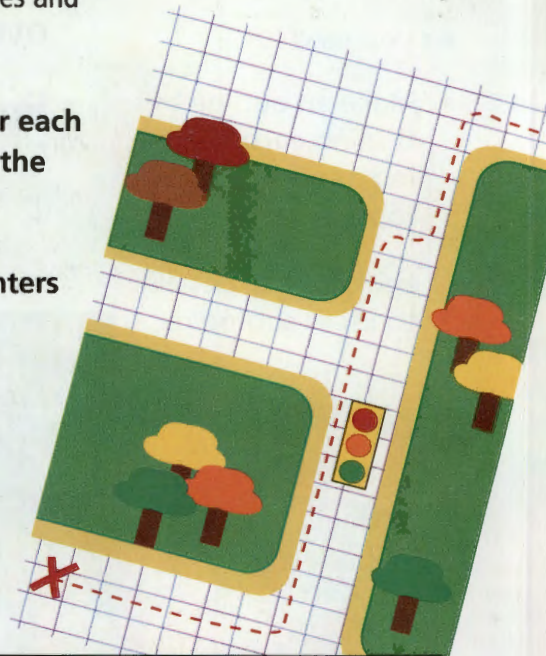


Math

Map a Route

Make a map of a two-mile route Mom and Ursula could take to practice Ursula's dog guide skills. Draw your route to scale. Use a formula in which one inch equals a fraction of a mile. Find information in the selection to help you figure out what obstacles to include, such as low branches and traffic lights.

Bonus Number each obstacle. Below the map, write what Ursula should do when she encounters each obstacle.



Internet

Post a Review

What would you like to tell others about *Mom's Best Friend*? What did you learn while reading it? Post your review at Education Place. www.eduplace.com/kids

Health Link

Skill: How to Outline

Before you read . . .

Think about the parts of an outline:

Title: what the selection is about

- I. **Main topic:** tells a main idea
- A. **Subtopic:** gives key details about the main topic

As you read . . .

- Make an outline by turning each heading into a main topic.
- Look for key details to list as subtopics.

Monkeys with

Well-trained monkeys shine at helping human friends overcome limits.

A man is thirsty and wants a drink of water, but he can't get it for himself. The man, George Boyle of Cleveland, Alabama, can't move his arms or legs because his neck was broken in a car accident. So his good friend Gizmo gets the drink for him.

Gizmo is a helpful, playful monkey. Here Gizmo gets ready to place a water bottle in a holder, open it, and insert a straw. Gizmo does other tasks for Boyle, who gets around using a wheelchair.



Standards to Achieve

Reading

- Understand text features (R.2.1)
- Discern main ideas (R.2.3)



a Mission



by Suzanne Wilson

Gizmo, 14, is a capuchin (kuh-PYOO-shun) monkey. She comes from Helping Hands, an organization in Boston, Massachusetts, that trains capuchins to help people with disabilities. In South America capuchins live in the wild. But the monkeys from Helping Hands are born at a special breeding facility near Boston. Intelligent and small, capuchins easily form relationships with people.

Family First

"She's like my sister," says Elizabeth Ford, 13, about Sadie. The capuchin has lived with Elizabeth's family in Norton, Massachusetts, for three years. Sadie will spend another two or three years there, getting used to living with people. Then she'll be trained to help a person with a disability.

Like Elizabeth, Sadie enjoys eating snacks. Unlike Elizabeth, though, her favorite hangout is on the roof (right). Elizabeth will be sad when Sadie leaves to start her training, but says, "I know she'll be helping somebody."





Learning to Help

Training follows the family stay. At Helping Hands, a monkey called Patty learns to turn the pages of a magazine (above). "The monkeys are so curious, and they love doing the tasks," says trainer Sue Costa.

Using a laser pointer, Costa indicates objects a monkey must work with or fetch. First the monkeys learn the basics — getting food and drinks or retrieving dropped objects. Then they learn special tasks, such as loading a computer disk, putting a cassette into a VCR, or punching telephone buttons. After about 18 months, most monkeys are ready for work. Then Helping Hands carefully matches humans to monkeys, based on personality.

Living 30 to 40 years, a capuchin is a long-term companion. People don't have to pay for their capuchin helpers. But training and caring for the monkeys is costly. Helping Hands can afford to place only six to ten monkeys a year.



Lunch is served when Kimba opens a sandwich holder.



A red laser light shows Patty which switch to flip.

Working

Gizmo finished her training. Now she doesn't monkey around when she's busy at work. She knows she'll earn a reward when she positions the magazine Boyle wants to read (right). Boyle blows through a straw to dispense fruit juice treats to Gizmo. While he reads, Gizmo watches traffic from the window, plays, or sits in the sun. She likes musical toys and watching TV commercials. At night she sleeps in a big cage with her stuffed animals and a blanket.

Every morning a health-care worker helps Boyle bathe and dress. Then Boyle and Gizmo spend the day together. "She's a lot like a child," says Boyle. He gives Gizmo presents on her birthday and knows when she's happy by the way she chirps. Gizmo often knows what Boyle wants before he asks her. Friends for five years, they will be together for many more.



Gizmo comes to the rescue when Boyle asks her to scratch his nose.