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Pet Tales: Dogs who serve get free eye exams

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Andrew Rush/Post-Gazette

Lola stand patiently during her exam by veterinary ophthalmologist Rachel Keller at Pittsburgh Veterinary Specialty & Emergency Center in Ohio Township. The 2-year-old yellow Lab is a guide dog for Mike Gravitt of Dormont.

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By Linda Wilson Fuoco /Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The eyes of Lola and Yahtzee are more precious than the eyes of most dogs; these Labrador retrievers are the eyes and lifelines of their blind partners.

Lola, a 2-year-old yellow female, and Yahtzee, a 10-year-old black male, are among the 100-150 "working" dogs getting free screening eye exams this month at Pittsburgh Veterinary Specialty & Emergency Center.

Earlier this week, Lola came to the Ohio Township facility with partner Mike Gravitt. His wife, Johna Gravitt, came with Yahtzee. Both dogs were trained by Guiding Eyes for the Blind in Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

The couple and their dogs live in a Dormont apartment building.

"At home when their harnesses come off they are just dogs," said Mr. Gravitt. The dogs get along well and enjoy playing with each other when they are off-duty, he said.

Dilating drops were applied to the eyes of Lola and Yahtzee. Then both sat nicely in the waiting room for 20 minutes. The actual exams took just a few minutes.

Yahtzee's regular veterinarian thought he saw cholesterol deposits in his eyes, Mrs. Gravitt told Rachel Keller, a veterinary eye specialist known as an ophthalmologist.

"I see cloudiness related to his age. I do not see cataracts. For being almost 11 years old, Yahtzee looks terrific," Ms. Keller said.

Young Lola passed with flying colors.

Last year 7,400 animals who work and serve got free exams from 290 veterinary eye specialists in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. The program is called the annual ACVO/Stokes RX National Service Animal Eye Exam Event.

This is the 10th anniversary of the exams, sponsored by the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists and Stokes Pharmacy, a national compounding pharmacy.

Free eye exams have been given to 52,000 animals since the program began in 2008. The vast majority are dogs, but some horses, pigs and other animals have benefited, too.

Eligible are animals that lead the blind, assist people with medical or psychological issues, work with the military or police, or work on search and rescue. Certified therapy dogs are also covered.

"We see more and more dogs each year," Dr. Keller said. The four eye specialists PVSEC have not diagnosed any life-threatening or work-ending eye ailments.

"Can I give them treats even though they are in their working harness?" Dr. Keller asked. Permission was granted, much to the delight of the dogs.

The vests or harnesses of many working dogs say "do not pet." Lola's says, "Do not feed or flirt with me."

This was Dr. Keller's first visit with Lola and her last with Yahtzee.

"Yahtzee seems to be losing his focus and is sometimes more interested in sniffing than in guiding," Mrs. Gravitt said. "It's time for him to retire, probably at the end of the summer."

Dr. Keller asked Mr. Gravitt about his former partner, Rick, a 13-year-old Labrador retriever she had seen every year since 2008. Rick retired last fall, and one day later Mr. Gravitt was teamed with Lola.

"Rick had some cysts around his eyes that the doctors watched over the years," Mr. Gravitt said. "The cysts didn't cause any problems. But he had to retire because of breathing problems."

"It's really hard when they retire," Mrs. Gravitt said. "But it's good to know they will live the rest of their lives as pets. They must go to a home where people are with them all day because that's what they are used to."

Rick was adopted by a veterinary technician at West Liberty Animal Hospital, where the couple regularly take their dogs.

"Rick is very happy with his new guy," Mr. Gravitt said, and he goes to work with him every day.

Yahtzee will move in with the family of an employee at Bender Consulting Services Inc., where both Gravitts work.

The Guiding Eyes organization provides veterinary care for their working dogs, Mr. Gravitt said, including Rick's successful cancer treatments when he was 8 years old.

"I'm toying with the idea of starting a nonprofit to raise money for the veterinary care of retired service dogs," Mr. Gravitt said. "I'd like to give back to them for what they give to us."

Cost of training

The www.guidingeyes.org (<http://www.guidingeyes.org>) website says the organization spends \$50,000 to raise and train each dog, but the dogs are free to recipients such as the Gravitts. Donations fund the program.



Fun fact: People who donate \$3,000 can name a Guiding Eyes puppy. Mr. Gravitt said his current dog was named by National Hockey League commissioner Gary Bettman, who gave her the same name as his own pet, Lola.

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