

## **Lessons, Labradors and lots of love: 20 years of Puppy Raising at school.**

Allysia never imagined that a simple question from a student would change her life. While working at a boarding school on Sydney's North Shore in 2005, a student researching a Guide Dogs NSW/ACT project came across puppy raising and asked, "Why can't we do this here?"

"I didn't have a good enough excuse to say no," says Allysia. "I'm a country girl, and I missed my animals more than my family when I was a boarder."

Allysia's school became only the second in NSW to have a dog on campus—well before the therapeutic benefits of dogs in schools were widely recognised. They pitched the idea of a puppy living in a boarding house full of energetic girls, which was understandably a concern for Guide Dogs at the time. But everyone decided to give it a go, and Allysia soon began the journey with her first pup: a black Labrador named Abbie. Full of personality and drive, Abbie thrived in the school environment, loved being around the students, and became a confident and successful Guide Dog.

Being a Puppy Raiser for Guide Dogs NSW/ACT is a volunteer role that involves caring for a Guide Dog puppy in your home from eight weeks to around 14 months of age. It's all about giving the Labrador pup the best possible start in a loving home, socialising them in different environments, and helping them learn basic training. These special dogs then return to the Guide Dog Centre in Glossodia for assessment and further training before beginning their careers as Guide Dogs, Therapy Dogs, Court Dogs, and more.

Now, 18 life-changing Labrador pups later, Allysia is Head of Boarding at Ascham School in Edgecliff, Sydney. She cares for 125 boarders, most of them girls from regional NSW, and lives on campus with her husband and daughter. Puppy raising is not just a solo effort; it's a family affair and a school-wide initiative. Although the pup lives with Allysia's family and joins her on weekends and holidays, they're first and foremost part of the school and boarding house community.

"If all we have to do to help someone gain mobility and independence is to love a dog in this environment and expose them to lots of people, then that's a pretty easy thing for us to do—and an amazing experience for our boarders to be a part of," she says.

Allysia has always raised Guide Dog pups as part of a school community, and it's become a way of life for her. She first did it as a single woman, and when her husband and daughter came along, they got on board too.

Her current Guide Dog-in-training is Occhi (Italian for "eyes"), a black Labrador. Occhi accompanies her to work each day, takes part in school life, and is a much-loved member of the boarding house. She also enjoys curling up and reading with

Allysia's daughter, Elsie, at the end of a busy day. Sometimes, Occhi visits the family's farm in the Hunter, where they run Black Angus cattle. Allysia has seen the occasional pup try their luck as a cattle dog, and the black Labradors have even been mistaken for mini cows by the herd.

"It's not every day that a Guide Dog gets up close to some big 400-kilogram cattle," Allysia says.

Occhi is loved by all the students, from kindergarten through to Year 12. Allysia says that with special training and supervision, students participating in the Duke of Edinburgh Award will occasionally take Occhi for a walk off campus. While sometimes, a student who needs a bit of space or time out will also spend some quiet, one-on-one time with her.

Another very important part of being a Puppy Raiser, aside from the love and cuddles, is helping to prepare the Labradors for their future roles. Alyssia and Occhi attend fortnightly group training with other Puppy Trainers in their local area, alongside Guide Dogs Puppy Development Advisor, Sabrina.

"It's not just important for the dog's benefit and helping them learn new skills—it's also really lovely to meet everyone else and share the trials, tribulations, and funny stories that come with puppy raising," Allysia says.

"If you ever see a group of misbehaving Labradors in a park, it's probably a bunch of Guide Dogs training—because they've got to start somewhere."

Along with the social aspect of meeting other Puppy Raisers, Allysia values the ongoing support she receives from Guide Dogs NSW/ACT whenever she has a question or needs help with a puppy. "You get so much support from your Puppy Advisor, from Guide Dogs themselves, and from the network that you create—which makes it easy to bring a dog into your home and love them," she says.

Although it's hard to say goodbye to each pup as they continue on their journey, Allysia knows that each one is going on to find their perfect match. Her 11-year-old daughter has known nothing but puppy raising since she was born, so as a family they talk about "loving a dog and giving it away to help others."

"We can be sad, and we can love them when they go, but they're off to fulfil a special purpose," Allysia says.

Some of the Labradors she has raised have gone on to become successful Guide Dogs, Therapy Dogs and Court Dogs. One special Therapy Dog, Solly, was placed at Ambulance NSW Head Office in their call centre, where he helped boost morale throughout COVID. Another dog, Vic, was a Breeding Dog who is now working as a Court Dog on the Central Coast.

Allysia is sometimes contacted by the individuals or families who are matched with one of the Labradors she's puppy raised. She's never been tempted to keep a dog—apart from one, a beautiful puppy named Pip. But she knew Pip would find her perfect match, and she did, becoming a Therapy Dog partnered with a young girl. The family sent Allysia and her family photos and a heartfelt note expressing their gratitude.

“You don't do the gig of looking after a Guide Dog puppy to get thanked, but it's a lovely affirmation when you see the life-changing outcomes,” says Allysia.

For anyone considering volunteering to become a Puppy Raiser, Allysia says, “I would say don't hesitate. Get your family on board, whatever that looks like, and get others on board too, because it's not a solo project. The level of support you get from Guide Dogs is amazing. You're not alone in it.”

**Interested in volunteering to become a Puppy Raiser for Guide Dogs NSW/ACT? Visit our website for more information: [nsw.guidedogs.com.au/get-involved/become-puppy-raiser/](https://nsw.guidedogs.com.au/get-involved/become-puppy-raiser/)**