

Good boy! The heartwarming — and heartbreaking — act of training puppies to be guide dogs

By [Sherry Stripling](#)

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With his black lab, Blakelee, lying steady at his feet in his father's van, Brandon Jones, 13, talks about the emotion of giving up a dog he has loved for a year. But he carefully controls his feelings.

"I don't feel good about today," Brandon says in even tones, jaw squared. He has spent the last year training Blakelee to be a Guide Dog for the Blind, and today is the day he must give him up at a dog exchange in Tacoma. He will get a new puppy to train, but any potential excitement is lost in the anguish of first having to give up Blakelee. "I don't want to let him go."

Blakelee raises his smooth head at the sound of his affable young master's voice. Brandon looks out the window.

"This is a tough day," his dad, Charles Winfield "Windy" Jones, says from the front seat. "This is not fun."

Brandon deeply believes in this cause. One of the earlier puppies his family raised for Guide Dogs for the Blind went on to be a complete success. That dog — born calm, reared steady and well loved — had the self-confidence to disobey his blind owner when she unknowingly ordered him to step into a flooded street.

All five of the puppies Brandon's family has raised have been good dogs, but Blakelee is surely the best. He's also the first puppy that was Brandon's to raise.

Brandon eased into this calling as his sister, Erin, 19, eased out of it to go to college. They took turns sleeping in their sweat clothes in Blakelee's first months so they'd be ready to hop outside in the middle of the night for potty training. (Guide-dog pups are never off their leashes outside.)

Brandon took Blakelee everywhere: to the store, on public transportation and into crowds of people and dogs. He trained him to ignore french fries on the floor at McDonald's and to submit to petting by strangers without losing his focus.

"It's a 24-hour-a-day job," says Brandon's dad, who leads a 4-H group of puppy raisers in Kirkland.

Now Blakelee is 15 months old. He's into adulthood. Brandon has taken him as far as he can, and Blakelee, bred to work, needs to move on to learn more.



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Sitting in a cold parking lot, Brandon Jones, 13, spends a few last moments with the black lab, Blakelee, that he trained for a year. Blakelee is being turned in to receive more advanced training to become a guide dog.

Raising a guide dog

There are 145 Guide Dog for the Blind puppy raisers in Washington state who teach basic obedience, housetraining and social skills to specially bred dogs from age 2 months to about 15 months.

To learn more, call Guide Dogs for the Blind at 800-295-4050 or visit their Web site at www.guidedogs.com.



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Before giving up Blakelee, Brandon gets the new puppy that he will train for the next year. It's an emotional moment.

This is the hard part.

Above all his other lessons, Blakelee has learned to love. Guide-dog puppies are bred for patience and desire to please, but this first bond is critical. The next person Blakelee loves will trust his or her life to this devotion.

There lies the rub. The stronger the bond, the harder it is to let go.

Brandon runs down the list of what makes Blakelee so special.

"He's easygoing. He wants to please. He wants to be with you," Brandon says, stroking Blakelee's brindled head.

"When I come home from school, he just goes 'HI!!!!!! You're here!!!!!!' "

Twenty-three people await new puppies at the 4-H headquarters in Tacoma. About half, like Brandon, also will turn in dogs they've raised for a year. A teenage girl from Ellensburg can't stop sobbing.

First comes the easy part. This state's puppy-raising adviser, Michele Cawley, hands Brandon a new black-lab puppy.

Then begins the agonizing wait while the truck gets cleaned to take the maturing dogs to the guide-dog school in Boring, Ore., where Blakelee will begin nine phases of additional training. If he graduates to a new owner in three months, the whole Jones family will go the ceremony, Kleenex box in hand.

Brandon stands at the front of the line with Blakelee, determined to get this part over with.

"We've got the good and the bad today," says Cawley over the loudspeaker.

Brandon has done a great job, she says. If Blakelee doesn't make it as a guide dog, he has the foundation to become a therapy or rescue dog or a wonderful pet.

Puppy-raisers get the first option for a dog that washes out or makes a "career change," as half do. The Joneses, in fact, took back the first dog they raised, a yellow lab.

"I want him back," Brandon tells Cawley, outline of his hands as fists barely visible through his sweatshirt pockets. "If he doesn't make it, I want him back."



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Later, the new puppy sops up Brandon's sadness as he thinks of Blakelee.

The moment arrives. Brandon takes Blakelee into the truck, slips him into a cage, hugs him goodbye and shuts the door. It's over. He's done it.

But his stoicism doesn't last. A few minutes later, he takes the new puppy in his arms. He steps behind a parked car and cries into the puppy's fur.

The emotion ripples as his dad's eyes scan the crowd for Brandon. The instant he sees him, Windy Jones pivots on his heel away from his son and roughly brushes away his own tear.

Later this night, Brandon will sleep in his sweat clothes ready to get up several times. Blakelee, meanwhile, will sleep in what Brandon calls "the doggy Hilton" on the 48-acre guide-dog campus in Oregon.

Brandon makes his way to his father's van, where he putters around in the back. The new puppy stretches to stand with his front feet on the bumper. The closer he sidles to Brandon, the more his little black tail wags.

It's a nice try on the puppy's part, and Brandon will soon reciprocate. But on this day his heart is full.

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