

I became a father at 16—a parent of a baby who mostly sleeps, cries, eats, and occasionally makes accidents, finding a way to wreak havoc wherever she goes. Yet, she is the most adorable, squishy-faced, wide-eyed, soft little thing imaginable.

Rivi is a Golden Retriever-Labrador mix, bred by Guide Dogs for the Blind. We go everywhere together. She wears a “Guide Dog in Training” jacket as we walk down the hallways at school, take the elevator at the mall, or work out at the gym.

Roughly two years ago, I joined the Palo Alto Puppy Club, where I spent more than a year learning how to handle and train a guide dog puppy from their first few weeks of life. So many little things: how to properly reward them, make them “do their business” on command, or teach them how to stop at the edge of a curb—potentially saving someone’s life. I went through assessments, evaluations, home visits, meetings, workshops, and conferences—all in preparation for raising a dog of my own. I knew that, given the opportunity, I could play a part in changing the life of someone who is visually impaired or blind.

After nearly 15 months of training, my desire to have an adorable little puppy became a reality. Enter Rivi. I was thrilled, so excited—and relieved—to finally have her. And then, she relieved herself *on me*. I knew then it was time to get to work and put all I had learned into practice.

Within the first four months, I had to potty train her, socialize her, and introduce her to the work jacket, which gives us access to go anywhere together. She was a quick learner. Within

a couple of months, she was ready to go into stores, restaurants, and school. Outside the house, she was a model dog for the program—an absolute angel.

Inside the house, however, she was a completely different dog. She would rip up furniture, tear apart wires, bark, and counter-surf—basically jumping up with her front paws onto any surface she could. She snatched toxic things off the counter, which resulted in visits to urgent care.

While she appeared “perfect” at our club meetings and in public, I was fighting a war at home. After talking with my supervisors, they made it crystal clear: if I couldn’t fix her behavior within the next couple of weeks, they would transfer her to another home. I was crushed.

I couldn’t stand the thought of losing her. This was a wake-up call for me. Immediately following that meeting, I put her in “lockdown”—a five-week period where her leash had to be attached to someone at all times. Those five weeks were grueling. Managing her was a full-time job, yet I was still balancing my summer job and classes. Days became all about Rivi, consuming my life with her training and constant attention.

I began to lose confidence in her, but I trusted the process. Slowly, I started seeing results. The counter-surfing and other bad behaviors eventually stopped almost entirely.

Rivi is now a year old and still a work in progress with occasional setbacks, but she will be with me for the next several months. We still have some time to perfect her behavior.

Even in high school, we continued to grow together. In a place often filled with competition and stress, Rivi, even in training, acted as an emotional support animal. What I

thought would be my own little niche hobby turned into a beautiful experience, connecting me with so many amazing people—all while accompanied by a cute, fluffy partner along the way.

If I do my job right, she will become the eyes for a blind person and keep them safe. As much as I want her to succeed, the hardest part will be letting her go. From the beginning, I knew she would eventually leave me, but I never thought that prospect would be this hard. The thought of her not being by my side almost breaks me, but I look forward to keeping in touch with her blind partner and watching the rest of her journey.