American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Guide dogs in training practice their skills at Atlanta airport

3/5/2019

The Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL) was overrun by cuteness recently when more than 30 future guide dogs descended on Concourse T for a training day. The pups — golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers and poodles each between 7 and 16 months old — were taking part in an event organized by the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind and American Airlines designed to help acclimate the dogs to the busy airport environment. The dogs soared through several obstacles, including checking in at the ticket counter and going through a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoint, each intended to help them practice staying focused on their handler when faced with distractions.

The Guide Dog Foundation trains and places guide dogs with people who are blind or visually impaired, all at no cost to the handlers. Before the dogs ever receive formal guide dog training, they are matched with a puppy raiser who cares for the puppy from about eight weeks to 18 months. These volunteers help by socializing the dogs, exposing them to as many surroundings as possible, and teaching them basic obedience.

Izzie, a 13-month-old golden retriever, takes a play break with his puppy raiser, Lauren Cobb

“The more positive experiences the puppies have with novel situations, the more likely they will be able to handle all situations they may encounter with their future handler,” explained Lauren Cobb, a canine care representative with the Guide Dog Foundation. She works with Athens, Georgia-area puppy raisers. “Going through the airport, there’s a lot of standing and waiting, of course, and there’s a lot of people who want to give the puppies attention. So, it’s important for our puppies to be able to be calm and collected in the presence of large crowds of people.”

The Guide Dog Foundation also partners with American through its Puppies in Flight (PIF) program. Once a dog is

16 to 18 months old, American PIF volunteers help transport the puppies back to the Guide Dog Foundation to start formal training. Often, this is the first time these dogs are exposed to an airport or plane.

Representatives from one of the foundation's largest puppy-raising groups, located in Athens, reached out to Customer Accessibility Analyst Bonnie Hayes at American to see if American would be open to hosting a mock event for the dogs, similar to the airline's It's Cool to Fly program. Those volunteer-led events, held regularly at airports around the system, offer families traveling with children with autism the chance to experience the sounds and sensations of an airport and aircraft without ever taking off. Bonnie loved the idea and worked with team members at ATL to plan the event.

"It is important for American to be involved in the communities we serve," Bonnie said. "It is through relationships that we learn the best way to meet the needs of our customers with disabilities."

Eliana Das Neves, Airport Customer Experience Manager at ATL, coordinated with TSA at the airport to help prepare for the additional crowds and four-legged friends. "This is a very important event, and we know the importance of having these puppies familiarized with the airport and the many aspects of flying and travel, like sounds, crowds, clearing security, etc.," Eliana said. "Despite ATL being a large and busy airport, we all work very closely and have a great sense of community among all airlines and business partners."

Asia Asberry and Annie

Asia Asberry, a senior at the University of Georgia, attended the event with Annie, a 14-month-old black Lab she's been raising since March 2018. "As a public health major, I am very aware of various disparities between those who are able-bodied and those who may live with a disability," she said. "Often times, it is the case that those who live with a disability may not have the same access to be able to afford a guide dog that costs upwards of $50,000. That is why I am so happy to volunteer with the Guide Dog Foundation, which makes it possible for these dogs to go to those who are visually impaired for free."

In her time working with Annie, Asia has taken the pup to grocery stores, restaurants, gymnastic meets, among many other public spaces, but she knew the airport presented a unique training opportunity. "It's a good experience," she said. "I wanted her to be thoroughly exposed to the sights and sounds at the airport."

As for the puppies, the event's organizers and puppy raisers agreed the animals handled themselves like pros. "The event was a huge success," Bonnie said. "Thanks to the preplanning with TSA by our ATL team, clearing security was a breeze, and the puppies were able to tour the gate area, experience the jet bridge and take a ride on the train. We hope to make this a regular event with Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind in the Atlanta area, with at least two more events this year."

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