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GUIDING EYES HELPS 'WORKING' ANIMALS STAY SHIPSHAPE WITH FREE EXAMS FROM EYE SPECIALISTS

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photos by Andrew Rush / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Lola stands patiently during her exam (left and top) by veterinary ophthalmologist Rachel Keller. Johna and Mike Gravitt (above) talk with Keller after the exams for their service dogs, Yahtzee and Lola. The dogs are trained to assist their partners, who are blind.

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

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

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Johna (left) and Mike Gravitt talk with veterinary ophthalmologist Rachel Keller after an eye exam for their service dogs Yahtzee and Lola. The dogs are trained to assist their partners, who are blind.



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Veterinary ophthalmologist Rachel Keller examines Lola's eyes.

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

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

Dilating drops are applied to Lola and Yahtzee's eyes, then both sit nicely in the waiting room for 20 minutes. The actual exams take just a few minutes.

Johna Gravitt tells Dr. Rachel Keller, a veterinary ophthalmologist, that Yahtzee's regular veterinarian thought he saw cholesterol deposits in his eyes.

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

Young Lola passes with flying colours.

Last year 7,400 animals that 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 U.S. 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," Keller says. The four eye specialists at 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?" Keller asks. Permission is granted, much to the dogs' delight.

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

This is 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," Johna Gravitt says. "It's time for him to retire, probably at the end of the summer."

Keller asks Mike 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 Mike was teamed with Lola.

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

"It's really hard when they retire," Mike Gravitt says. "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," Mike Gravitt says, adding the dog goes to work with his new owner 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, including Rick's successful cancer treatments when he was eight years old.

"I'm toying with the idea of starting a non-profit to raise money for the veterinary care of retired service dogs," Mike Gravitt says. "I'd like to give back to them for what they give to us."

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Cost of training

The guidingeyes.org website says the organization spends US\$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 US\$3,000 can name a Guiding Eyes puppy. 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.