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MICHELE TOCCO TRAINS DOGS TO HELP THE MOST ISOLATED PEOPLE IN THE WORLD—THOSE WHO ARE BOTH DEAF AND BLIND

On a brisk Michigan morning, a golden retriever pads down a city sidewalk, angling straight toward a busy intersection. At the curb, as cars whiz back and forth just inches from her nose, the dog sits, waiting for a signal. It comes from behind: the sound of a hand slapping a jeans-clad thigh. The dog's ears prick up and her head swivels to watch as the hand swings up, then sharply to the right. It's a gesture the dog knows well; one she's practiced hundreds of times. Obediently, she rises and steers into a right turn, away from the traffic and back to the safety of the sidewalk. The stiff leather harness that identifies her as a guide dog in training creaks with every step.

"Good girl," trainer Michele Tocco croons, holding tight to the harness. The dog's intelligent brown eyes scan up, down and side to side, alert for hazards that could trip or snag the woman following on her heels. Today, her harness is a training tool. In a few short months, it will be the lifeline that allows someone who has lived a life of dark, silent isolation to step out into the world on their own.

Less than a dozen dogs are trained in the United States each year to become guides for people who are both blind and deaf, and Leader Dogs for the Blind school in Rochester, Michigan, which began the program in 1991, still produces most of these dogs.

Michele, a 40-year-old who communicates with her hands as easily as with her voice, has been doing this three days a week for three years. "I'm one of the lucky

few who gets to do what she loves for a living," she says. "I wake up happy every day."

When she's not working with dogs like Kolbe, a 21-month-old golden retriever, Michele works as an interpreter for the deaf, something she trained for at Madonna University in nearby Livonia, Michigan. Evenings, she says, are spent on her business, TerpTheatre, which provides sign language interpreters to theaters in the Detroit metropolitan area.

Training guide dogs isn't the career Michele imagined for herself when she was younger. In fact, she began her career in television, working at the local NBC affiliate. She did that for five years but became disillusioned because she was covering so many tragedies. "It was hard for me to take," she says. A friend at the news station who was interested in sign language talked Michele into taking a sign language class. When she learned that she could make a career as a translator, she thought, working with deaf people would be interesting and rewarding. "Go for it," said Nino, her husband of 18 years. And she's been happy ever since.

Finding the right dogs for the program is extremely difficult, says Michele. Dogs must learn to respond to commands from human partners who may or may not be able to speak aloud. Training a guide dog takes months of time, thousands of dollars, and a small army of staff and volunteers. Only the calmest, cleverest animals make it into a guide dog program, and just the best of the best make it through training with Michele and her team. Leader Dogs graduates some



Michele and her
latest recruit, Kolbe

real focus

When the **Ford Focus** begs
"Drive me!"

Lifetime answers,
"With pleasure."

Just five years on the road, this wondercar has been the model of performance. Lifetime caught up with the newly redesigned Focus for a refreshing afternoon of talks, turns and quality time behind the wheel of this dynamic ride.

Lifetime: Do you find it frustrating to constantly have to beg for time on the road?

Focus: Heck, no! When your reader puts down the magazine and takes me out on the road, she's having fun. I'm a little reminder to take some time for herself. If driving were just about getting from point A to point B, what would be the point?

Lifetime: Have you alienated yourself from other cars in your class being named *Car and Driver's 10Best* five years running?*

Focus: Truthfully, I feel badly for them. It has to be tough to not know what it's like to have **European-inspired suspension, an available 6-disc in-dash CD/MP3 player, increased horsepower and lower emissions.**** I had some world-class designers at Ford.

Lifetime: That's some serious equipment. So, what do you want to be, a serious car or a fun car?

Focus: I'm a car that delivers serious fun. You know what I'm talking about. I'm like the friend you'd ask to write a letter of recommendation but who also makes you laugh until your stomach hurts.

Lifetime: Well, Lifetime is serious about having fun.

Focus: So, drive me!



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real women inspirations

300 dogs a year—but only 6 to 8 guides for the deaf-blind.

Until Leader Dogs launched its program, there were guide dogs for the blind and assistance dogs for the deaf, but the idea of offering a leader dog to someone with both visual and hearing impairments was considered extremely risky. Few conditions can isolate a human being more completely than deaf-blindness. Imagine trying to cross the street if you couldn't see or listen for the traffic. Imagine trying to ask for help if you couldn't scribble a note—or even be sure there was another person nearby to

Michele and her team watch and wait to skim off the best of the best for the more demanding deaf-blind program. "We cherry-pick the best dogs," says Michele. "We're looking for love-my-master kinds of dogs. Dogs that are calm, easy to control and happy. We want them to love their jobs."

Michele's favorite day of the year is when a new class of students meet their dogs. The instructors try to match students and dogs who are compatible in everything from their walking speeds to their temperaments. "When the dogs walk with the students for the first time,

**"WE'RE LOOKING FOR LOVE-MY-MASTER DOGS.
 DOGS THAT ARE CALM, EASY TO CONTROL AND
 HAPPY. WE WANT THEM TO LOVE THEIR JOBS"**

read it. "The people I work with are the bravest people I've ever met," says Michele. "Seeing what they go through every day, seeing what they manage to overcome, makes you ashamed to complain about anything in your own life."

When the program first started, even some of the students were skeptical. Guide dogs can steer someone away from danger, but they can't make decisions about things like when it's safe to cross the street. In traditional guide dog pairs, the human listens for the sound of oncoming traffic. For Michele's students, it takes help, often from total strangers. Some carry communication cards, others use tape recorders set on a continuous loop: "I am blind and deaf. Please tap my hand when it is safe to cross the street."

Puppies spend a year with foster families, learning basic commands and becoming socialized to every imaginable situation. Families bring their puppies to restaurants, offices, sporting events, even out on boats. When the year is up, they return the dogs to the school, where

when the students see what the dog's doing for them, those are the best days," she says.

But it's not always love at first sight. One man, a big tough guy used to making his own way in the world, Michele says, couldn't believe his dog could live up to the school's promises. While the other students were petting their new dogs, he ignored his partner's friendly advances. Still skeptical, he took the dog home. One day, in their first month together, he harnessed the dog for a walk. At a busy intersection, he ordered the dog into the street—and into the path of a speeding delivery truck. He couldn't hear the engine revving or see the truck bearing down on him. But the dog could. It stopped him, curling around his legs, putting itself between the man and danger. The truck blew by, close enough for the man to feel the draft and smell the exhaust.

"That big tough man picked that dog up and hugged it," says Michele. "Tears were just streaming down his face. He said to me, 'This dog saved my life.'"