

The Dogs were the Stars at Dollywood...

Field Rep and Puppy Raisers Work Together

Several months ago, the Leader Dog Puppy Raisers in Tennessee approached the Dollywood theme park for a puppy outing. Unbeknownst to the puppy folk, the park was under a threat of lawsuit by a disability access rights group over the park's policy relating to service animals. When the arrangements for an outing came together, it was more than just a puppy outing. Our group was asked to evaluate a variety of the attractions relating to accommodations for dog guides and other service animals.

Leader Dog Field Rep. PDG Larry Colbert (AZ) with Leader Dog Banner, Bonnie Guyan (PA) with Leader Dog Albert, and the Tennessee puppy raisers met en masse at the Dollywood theme park near Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. Barbara Joines, Vice President/Assistant General Manager and her staff Robbie Fox (Safety and Security Director), Doug Messer (Director of Attractions), as well as Chris Cate and Evan Schukman (Attraction Supervisors) escorted us through the park for the day's activities.

At the onset of the tour, the Dollywood representatives were very communicative about their concerns. Prior negative experiences with service animals and their handlers left them skeptical. We were given a map of the park along with brochures outlining current policy. Park officials expressed a genuine willingness to listen to our honest opinions and suggestions.

Colbert discussed in detail with Barbara and her staff Dollywood's current position, future goals, and usefulness of the information we would ultimately provide. Our suggestions and recommendations along with that of other service animal organizations will be utilized in establishing future policies and guidelines relating to access of service animals accompanying their handlers on rides.

Each attraction was approached with access and safety in mind for the handler and the service animal. Prior to entering the area, Larry discussed options for accommodating the dogs on or off the feature. Once he felt the ride was safe, he and Banner hopped on. They rode the antique car ride, carousel and a few others.

Larry emphasized to the Dollywood representatives that they might treat the service animal as they would a small child. Just as some children are frightened or intimidated by strange things, so too might be some service animals. Thus, if a dog guide is hesitant, fearful, or resistant, the attraction operator should not permit the animal on the ride until it is calm.

The Smokey Mountain Adventure attraction was an IMAX movie featuring Dolly Parton and a Wild Inventor. This was a virtual reality experience complete with wind, water, and loud sound effects. Each participant was seat belted into a moveable pod which simulated all the gyrations and craziness depicted on the large screen.



While the theater portion was acceptable, the pods were not. Yet the "non-moving" section with theater style seating provided excellent alternatives. Aside from climbing 3 flights of stairs to access the stationary seating, another concern of management was the noise factor.

The theater has "surround sound". Fireworks, explosions, and crashing objects created quite a roar. So loud in fact, that 5-month-old Lab Puppy Dixie slept contentedly through the entire experience!

Lunchtime afforded the opportunity for all to discuss important issues which had surfaced. Appropriate relief (Park) areas, safety precautions, and Employee interactions with service animals were heavily discussed. For sure, all agreed there were specific rides which were an absolute NO NO - UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.

The day's activities and responses were documented with photographs and recordings for future reference in establishing new park policy. Dollywood General Manager Barbara Joines, expressed... "We had a great day and really learned a lot. I would consider it a 'special day' and it was about people. Spending time with your group was very energizing and the people, their stories and their animals touched each one of us. Many thanks for helping me to make this

'time' happen."

The day ended with all participants knowing additional attractions will now in all likelihood be available to guests with disabilities. For sure, some of our suggestions and recommendations will probably appear in the Dollywood 2003 Special Information booklet for Guests with Disabilities.

Needless to say, Leader Dog was well received. The Dollywood staff was appreciative of our concern and willingness to assist them in maintaining a safe and fun environment for all guests - Leader Dogs included! 🐾