



Girl Scout Educates Community on Guide Dog Etiquette
Carissa Chapa earns Gold Award for project, "Lending a Helping Paw"

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 21, 2020

Ventura, CA —

Carissa Chapa, a current senior at Oaks Christian High School, sought to bring recognition to a few of our favorite unsung heroes: guide dogs. These furry friends are essential to the blind and visually impaired members of our communities, however many are not familiar with the correct way to interact with them. With the goals to educate the public on proper guide dog etiquette and increase support for puppy raiser volunteers, Carissa devised a plan for her Girl Scout Gold Award project.

"According to the National Institutes of Health, in 2015 there were an estimated one million legally blind people in America," said Carissa. "That number goes up to nearly 8 million when you consider the visually impaired. There are currently over 10,000 working guide dog teams in the USA. The purpose of schools like Guide Dogs of America (GDA) is to empower people who are blind and visually impaired to live with increased independence, confidence, and mobility by expertly matching them with a well-trained guide dog partner. GDA is successful in creating 60 new guide dog teams per year; however, it takes a lot of volunteer effort, time, money, and training to get to these levels of success and they want to do more. I did my best to raise awareness about guide dog etiquette to help keep the guide dogs and their handlers focused and safe."

By reaching out to other Girl Scouts and children at local summer camps, Carissa was able to help her target audience gain a greater appreciation for guide dogs, their importance to their owners, and how to help puppy raiser volunteers. "[Guide dogs] make critical judgments and provide safety, increased independence, confidence, and mobility for their handlers," said Carissa. "Being distracted keeps them from staying focused on their handler and their job."

Carissa began by organizing two different dog toy parties, where she recruited friends and volunteers to hand-make fleece tug toys for the GDA. She then created an educational program consisting of a [presentation](#) and brochures to explain proper etiquette when encountering a guide dog team. These materials included information such as not to "touch, talk, feed or distract a guide dog because it needs to focus and help its handler." Finally, she secured a



booth at the Ventura County Fair, where she presented to roughly 500 people and handed out colorful paw stickers to children who pledged to practice guide dog etiquette.

"This project pushed me out of my comfort zone, taught me to be more patient, and more importantly showed me it is okay to ask for help," she said. "I learned how to quickly organize two events to make tug toys. For the Ventura County Fair, I learned how to make phone calls and ask questions to find out how to secure a table where I could hand out brochures and discuss guide dog etiquette with the community. Through all of this, I learned the importance of time management, how to manage a budget, and how to be flexible and quickly adapt to different situations."

Carissa was able to fund her project almost entirely through her proceeds from the Cookie Program, which she used to purchase fleece for the dog toys, paw print stickers, printed brochures, table décor, and thank you cards. She used her leftover income to donate to the Guide Dogs of America, along with the handmade tug toys. To cap off her project, Carissa's family even welcomed a puppy-in-training into their home.

"This project taught me to push my limits and go for it. I learned how to create new ways to get involved and make a difference." – Carissa Chapa

Carissa's project was shared in an [article](#) by the Camarillo Acorn, and the GDA was given her brochure templates and presentation for future use. The fleece dog toys will continue to be made each year by Oaks Christians High School cheerleaders.

To learn more about the highest achievement in Girl Scouts and the lasting change girls are creating in their communities, visit [here](#).

About Girl Scouts of California's Central Coast

Girl Scouts of California's Central Coast serves over 8,800 girls across six counties and is committed to making the Girl Scout Leadership Experience available to girls in ways that impact their lives both in the moment and into the future. Girls participate in troops, individual projects, council events, day camps, resident camps and more. A variety of leadership, outdoor skills, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) based programs and events provide girls with opportunities to learn and explore in fun and informative ways. To join or volunteer in Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara or Ventura County, visit: <http://www.girlscoutscoc.org>.

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