

## Hazel Green man needs help with service dog

By Yvonne T. Betowt, The Huntsville Times

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Robin Conn/The Huntsville Times

Guy Baker walks his service dog Maze with Lions Club member Wayne Perkins

HAZEL GREEN, AL -- Wayne Perkins, a funeral director and embalmer for Berryhill Funeral Home, moved to Hazel Green five years ago from the Washington D. C. area.

Guy Baker, a native of Madison County, is a retired truck driver who is legally blind from glaucoma.

This unlikely pair shares a common bond -- a dog -- a very special dog.

Maze, a yellow lab, is a service dog and constant companion for Baker who has lived alone after his mother, Louise Baker, died last June. Her death left Baker to survive on his social security check each month -- less than \$700.

Three years ago, Baker was referred to Leader Dogs for the Blind by a local Lions Club. He went to Rochester Hills, Mich., for 26 days to train with Maze, which was given to him at the conclusion of the orientation.

"We bonded pretty quickly," said Baker who got Maze when the dog was 16 months old. Baker, 58, was struggling to pay for Maze's vet bills and could only afford his shots, but nothing extra such as teeth cleaning. But service dogs need to be in top shape physically and having clean teeth goes a long way to ensure good health. So Baker turned to the Huntsville Pacesetters Lions Club for help.

When Perkins, a member of the Pacesetters Lions Club, learned about Baker's plight, he offered to help since he lives nearby.

"The Lions Club has been involved in helping people with sight problems since 1925," said Perkins. "Since Guy is nearly blind, we wanted to help."

While the Pacesetters have provided some financial assistance with food for Maze, Perkins said the club needs more help.

"We have several other projects and our money is limited," he said. "We're just trying to find someone who could help with food and veterinary care on a regular basis."

After learning about Maze, Banfield Animal Hospital at PetSmart in Jones Valley, offered to put him on its wellness plan, which includes all shots and yearly exams, and the Banfield Foundation will pay for a teeth cleaning. Flint River Animal Hospital has agreed to provide a free grooming for the 85-pound dog.

Maze only eats one kind of food -- Purina One chicken and rice. Purina One representative, Jim Davis, is donating coupons for Baker to purchase Maze's food.

"Wayne and the Lions Club have done so much for me and I can't thank them enough," said Baker. "And my church (First Baptist of Hazel Green) has been real good to help, too."

Shortly after Perkins arrived for a recent visit to see Baker and Maze, Baker immediately began to search in a drawer for his mother's eye glasses. He found three pairs which he gave to Perkins who collects them as part of the Lions Club ongoing project for needy people with sight problems.

Anyone wishing to help provide food or money to purchase dog food or who have old eye glasses to donate should contact Perkins at 425-4756 or Rodney Taylor at 933-0723.



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Guy Baker with service dog Maze

Leader Dogs for the Blind is a nonprofit organization founded in 1939 by a Detroit-area Lions Club which purchased 15 acres of land in Rochester Hills, Mich., to train guide dogs for people who are legally blind.

It is funded entirely by private donations, the majority coming from Lions Clubs throughout the world which are dedicated to helping the visually impaired. It also operates on corporate donations and grants.

Just this month, the 14,000th team graduated from its facilities. One of those teams included a Hazel Green man, Guy Baker, and his dog, Maze.

Dogs, and replacement dogs, are given to qualified applicants who must come to the training facilities alone and spend 26 days training with the canines, most which are bred on the property.

The cost, which includes the dog, training and travel expenses to and from the facilities, can cost more than \$35,000, according to Leader Dog Marketing Specialist Rachell Kniffen.

The organization accepts applications for dogs from anyone age 16 and over. Leader Dog officials are always in need of people who are willing to take the puppies and then return them to the facilities after a year. The dogs are then trained for four months before being matched with a human companion, said Stacy Benmark, Leader Dog director of consumer services.

For more information on Leader Dogs for the Blind, visit [www.leaderdog.org](http://www.leaderdog.org) or call 888-777-5332.

Any service dog in the United States or Canada certified by a formal training program or organization, or currently enrolled in a formal training program, is eligible for a free eye exam during the month of May.

The American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists (ACVO) and Merial and I-MED Pharma Inc., is teaming up for the third annual National Service Dog Eye Exam throughout May. Online registration begins April 1 and runs through May 16 ([www.ACVOeyeexam.org](http://www.ACVOeyeexam.org)).

Once registered online, the owner/agent of the dog can locate a participating ophthalmologist in their area and contact that doctor to schedule an appointment during May. Appointments are based on a first-come, first-served basis. There are more than 150 board certified veterinary ophthalmologists in the U. S. and Canada who have agreed to provide exams at no cost.

Stacey Daniel, executive director of the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmologists says "It we can assist more dogs, then the dogs can better assist people. This event is a success each year due to the outstanding support of our volunteer ophthalmologists, our sponsore and the service dog community. All ae instrumental in helping these dogs."

