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Enterprise

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By Dina Sciortino

ARDSLEY — When Linda Erickson learned that her dog Isabel, nicknamed “Izzy,” had suddenly gone blind, she was devastated.

“I was hysterical. It was just not what I expected to hear,” Erickson, a 59-year-old freelance photographer and choreographer from Frenchtown, N.J., said. Though the news was traumatizing, Erickson and Izzy — a 13-pound cotton de tular, which is small breed originally from Madagascar that is known for its long cotton-like coat — were able to overcome the hardship thanks to board-certified pet ophthalmologist Jane Cho of Veterinary Eye Specialists at 875 Saw Mill River Road in Ardsley.

Erickson was so impressed with Cho, who is one of two ophthalmologists at the Ardsley practice that Cho opened three and a half years ago, that she invited the specialist to appear in the pilot of “Little Champions: Big Heroes,” a show she is pitching to the cable channel Animal Planet.

“I’ve cried buckets of tears in front of her ... she was understanding and supported me,” Erickson, the project’s executive producer, said. “She was very tuned in to what we were suffering through, and what the dog was going through. I can’t say enough about her. She has all the qualities you want in a doctor.”

“Little Champions: Big Heroes” is a dog show — similar to the one staged annually by the Westminster Kennel Club — for disabled dogs. Each episode will feature five canines. The pilot was filmed in June and, in addition to Izzy, features a pit bull who lost his leg after being forced to fight other dogs, and a German shepherd who lost mobility due to hip dysplasia.

“I think it’s really interesting. It seems to build on a niche other shows don’t really quite touch on,” Cho, 41, of Ossining, said. “I think it really could be very beneficial for people getting through these difficult times with their pets, to know they aren’t alone and things could be OK.”

At the end of each episode a dog will be chosen as the winner based on how they overcame their situation. A final champion will be chosen from among each episode’s finalist at the end of the season.

However, the pilot’s spotlight hasn’t just gone to the dogs. “It’s really about the people who own these dogs and how they have been transformed by the disability, and how life has changed for them,” Erickson said. She hopes that the show will be inspiring to all, and not just the owners of disabled dogs. “There are some really amazing stories,” Erickson said.

During each episode veterinarians and canine specialists will be featured to explain the medical condition of each dog. That’s where Cho, who has been a veterinary ophthalmologist for 13 years, comes in. “This is the educational component. Letting people know this kind of thing exists, and signs and symptoms,” Erickson said, explaining that before Cho came along she was uninformed about blindness in dogs.

“I think it’s a good cause to let people know there’s actually lots of owners of blind dogs,” Cho said. “It’s hard to take that information. A lot of people have to go through a learning and transition phase. A lot of time they are in denial.”

Cho, who was filmed for “Little Champions” in her Ardsley office on June 22, will tell Izzy’s story. Izzy went blind from glaucoma. Glaucoma causes increased pressure within the eye when the eye does not properly drain fluid produced to nourish its tissue. The buildup in pressure results in pain and decreased blood flow to the retina, damaging the optic nerve and causing the dog to lose vision.

Like humans, primary glaucoma is a hereditary condition in dogs, and is especially common in American cocker spaniels and basset hounds. Secondary glaucoma occurs when other eye conditions, including inflammation, cataracts or cancer, prevent the eye from draining properly.

Permanent blindness can happen within several hours of pressure developing. Izzy lost sight in one eye in about two days, three years ago. The only warning Erickson had was that Izzy kept blinking. Other signs or symptoms include bloodshot eyes, cloudy corneas or change in a dog’s behavior. Many times dogs compensate with their good eye so it is difficult to tell if they are losing vision.

Izzy was treated with medication to reduce the pressure and pain in her eye, and prevent the other eye from



Izzy, a cotton de tular who was blinded by glaucoma.

getting infected. Humans feel less pressure in their eyes from glaucoma than dogs, so the condition is often more painful for dogs.

Glaucoma spread to Izzy’s other eye, causing her to go totally blind last year. “We tried a lot of expensive medicines, lots of visits back and forth. As with many dog diseases, it gets worse and worse until you do surgery,” Cho said.

To relieve the pressure, both of Izzy’s eyes were removed, with prosthetics implanted in April 2008. Izzy’s entire treatment cost around \$5,000. However, the expense of glaucoma treatment can vary significantly depending on the severity of the condition.

Canines that become blind often adapt and end up living joyful lives. “Now you can’t even tell she’s blind. She knows exactly where everything is in the house,” Erickson said of Izzy, who is now 11. “I don’t know how she does it!”

Dogs are often happier post surgery because they are no longer in pain. “They get around it, it just takes adjustment. They’re comfortable,” Cho said. “Living with blindness is much easier for a dog than a person.”

“Little Champions” is currently being edited. Erickson says she is trying to find pet food and supply companies to come on board as sponsors, as well as incorporate celebrity pet advocates in the show. She plans to meet with Animal Planet representatives to pitch the pilot in September.



Dr. Jane Cho during the filming of “Little Champions.”