**Chapter 34: Preparing for Graduation**

Believe it or not, graduation day is fast approaching and it’s time to start planning and preparing for the ceremony. A 10-minute portion of the program is given to graduates to fill however you want. This chapter will give some ideas and guidelines as to how to do that, as well as talk about what to expect on Graduation Day. As the day approaches, we will also practice a couple of full rehearsals, so you’ll know exactly what to do on the day.

Graduates should decide as a group how you would like to represent yourselves. Many classes choose a graduate speaker, or you can have more than one if you wish. For example, you could choose someone to represent the first-time guide dog users and someone to represent the returning graduates. You may also choose to add a short poem or song. The time is given over to you so you may make the ceremony your own. However, nothing religious or political should be included in the ceremony. If you need any props, please let us know well before graduation and we will try to get them for you. If you want to use the piano, please let us know as soon as possible so it can be tuned. Speakers/performers need to be chosen by Monday before graduation so that programs can be printed. If you are chosen as a speaker/performer, the Class Supervisor will need to see a copy of your material by Thursday morning before graduation for approval.

Graduation is open to the public, family, friends and puppy raisers, many of whom have been waiting anxiously for this day. We often don’t know which puppy raisers are coming until very close to graduation itself.

Approximately 100 – 150 people attend each graduation ceremony. Along with puppy raisers, the audience is comprised of staff, volunteers, donors and potential new friends of Guiding Eyes. Part of the ceremony will honor our many volunteers. These positions are quite diverse and include a range of time and energy commitments.

Everyone at graduation is there to celebrate your success and your new partnership with your Guiding Eyes dog. There are volunteers and supporters who have been connected to Guiding Eyes for many years – some of whom may be attending their very first graduation. Most of these people have contributed to this day in some way and have looked forward to it for a long time. They are there because they want to make a difference – either with their time or their financial resources. For many people, graduation day serves as the culminating point of their efforts.

Please keep these audiences in mind as you gather your thoughts; here are some suggestions for crafting an inspirational graduation speech:

* Relate an important life milestone that brought you to Guiding Eyes.
* Share some previous life accomplishments and any hopes or dreams for your life with your new guide dog.
* Think about what you might be able to achieve now, that you might not have been able to before.
* How has your experience at Guiding Eyes affected your life for the better?

Guiding Eyes’ team of over 1500 volunteers and even more numerous donors make it possible for us to place 170 guide dogs each year. It is our hope that people leaving graduation are inspired by what they’ve heard - and motivated to continue to make a difference for our future students.

**A few more things to keep in mind as you start thinking about graduation:**

Our puppy raising regions extend from Maine to North Carolina and west to Ohio, as well as a satellite region in Colorado. Many puppy raisers drive a long way just to meet you and see their puppy for what could be the last time. For many, this event provides some closure, but they also come to celebrate you as a team which in turn reinforces the sacrifices and love spent getting this puppy here to this one very important day. Though you may have friends and family coming to see you as well, please plan to spend time with your puppy raisers. Many of them will have put together a gift or photo album for you. They may only be able to be here for a short time before turning around and heading home. They will all have stories for you of your dog from their puppyhood. Remember, these are “puppy” stories and may be no more relevant to the adult dog you have now than the stories your parents tell about you as a toddler.

Puppy raisers may also gift you with photo books, toys, or other keepsakes that you should accept graciously. If you find that you have received a toy or treat that you feel is not appropriate, simply consult with your instructors later to decide if they are safe or not.  
  
Programs will be available in Braille and Large Print. Please let instructors know if you would like one of these so that we can be sure there are enough printed and put them aside for you.

You will have the option to work your dog to your seat for graduation. Instructors will provide opportunities for you to practice and teach your dog to target your specific seat.

We will be showing the class slideshow right before graduation. This will feature photos taken throughout class and includes audio description. Everyone will get a copy which will be sent to your home.

The afternoon before graduation, maintenance will set up Alumni Hall with chairs for the audience, so Alumni Hall will not be available for play sessions Friday evening. We will do our final rehearsal of graduation Saturday morning.

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