Guiding Eyes for the Blind Quarterly Call – April 25, 2021

Topic:

Meet Your 2021-2022 Guiding Eyes Graduate Council members and Officers

Council members in attendance:

Liz Bottner, Victoria Keatting, Andrea Conner, Nicole Yarmolkevich, Deborah Groeber, Rick Ross, Leslie Hamric, Deirdre Maxwell, Cindy LaBon and Jywanza Maye

Liz, outgoing Graduate Council President, welcomed everyone. “We will be introducing you to the 2021-2022 Graduate Council members,” Liz said. She then turned the meeting over to Victoria.

Victoria thanked Liz for serving on the Council the past couple of years, hoping it was a fun and rewarding time for her.

“I am the new President of the Grad Council,” Victoria said proudly. She is honored and excited to serve as President her final term year on the Council. Victoria lives in Colorado with nine-year-old Watson, a male yellow Lab. Watson has enjoyed his time on the Council too, often being mentioned in the Monthly Pill Reminder which Victoria will continue to create for our Graduate Community.

Victoria then introduced Andrea Conner – Council Vice President.

Andrea is working her second GEB dog Gretzky, a male yellow Lab. They live in Wauconda, a suburb north of Chicago. Andrea said, “You can read more about me and other Council members in the Graduate Center of the Guiding Eyes for the Blind website.”

Andrea was invited to fill a vacated position on the Council in September, 2020. She was elected Recording Secretary in November, 2020 and will serve as the Vice President her final term year. “It’s been a rewarding experience these past seven months serving on the Council,” Andrea said.

Andrea had the privilege of introducing one of Council’s newest members: Deirdre Maxwell – Recording Secretary.

Deirdre and Cappy, short for Captain, is a male German Shepherd. He is Deirdre’s second GEB dog, ninth overall. They live in Tacoma, Washington. “I’m thrilled to be on Grad Council and excited for the next year as the Recording Secretary,” Deirdre said. She then introduced Cindy LaBon- Corresponding Secretary.

Cindy lives in Gaithersburg, Maryland; otherwise known as the Montgomery Region, with her first guide dog, Gardenia. They graduated in the “hurricane class” of November, 2012. “I am looking forward to being an active member of the Council and see what I can do to help out our fellow grads,” Cindy said.

Cindy began the introductions of the remaining Council members. First up -.

Leslie Hamric.

Leslie and her fourth guide dog, Gerry, live in Schaumburg, Illinois, home to Woodfield Mall, one of the largest malls. The team has been together six years as of April, 2021. Leslie is a professional cellist, pianist and vocalist. She has a Bachelor’s Degree from Northern Illinois University and a Master’s Degree from Eastern Illinois University, both in Cello Performance.

Leslie stated, “It is a privilege and an honor to be serving as a new member on the Graduate Council.” She looks forward to contributing and taking an active role on the Council.

Nicole Yarmolkevich

Nicole also lives in the Chicago area; Buffalo Grove, about fifteen minutes from the famous Woodfield Mall. Nicole is working with Pat, her third Guiding Eyes dog. Nicole has been giving Pat a “talking to” the past three years. She tells Pat, with a chuckle in her voice, “you’re still good.”

Nicole is an Illinois Licensed Professional Counselor. She does individual and group therapy as well as case management for a large hospital system in the Chicago area. “Pat is often times the best presence in the room,” Nicole conceded, “he brings a calm presence as he chills out.”

Nicole is excited for her third and final year on the Graduate Council, particularly moving out of the pandemic.

Deborah Groeber

Deborah resides in Glenside, Pennsylvania with Iris, her sixth Guiding Eyes dog. Prior to the Pandemic, this running team ventured into Center City Philadelphia three to five days per week to run together. Deborah is beginning her second year on the Graduate Council, having been selected to serve in April, 2020. Deborah introduced Rick Ross, selected alongside her last year.

Rick Ross

Rick hails outside of Philadelphia on the opposite side of the Delaware River in New Jersey. He was matched in 2017 with his first Guiding Eyes dog, Leon. Rick is an Alcohol and Drug Counselor, primarily working with judicated clients. He is looking forward to the two remaining years of his term on the Graduate Council. Rick introduced the final new member, Jywanza Maye.

Jywanza was born and raised in New York City – Brooklyn and relocated to Indianapolis, Indiana several years ago. Jywanza is currently working with his third Guiding Eyes dog, Wyatt, a male black Lab he was matched with in June, 2017. “I am honored to serve all the graduates; if any of you need any assistance, feel free to reach out to me,” Jywanza stated. He reminded participants that the Council Member’s Bios (contact info) are on the Guiding Eyes website.

Victoria thanked the Council members for their great introductions.

“As everybody has said, we really do want to be available to address your questions, concerns or suggestions that may benefit the grads and our school.”

Victoria opened up the call for Q & A.

Kathy Nimmer with Nacho from Indiana:

Q) What drew you to want to be on the Council - what motivated and inspired you?

Jywanza replied, “I want to serve on the Council because Guiding Eyes has given me three outstanding guide dogs.” When he first became blind at the age of fifteen while living in New York City, he would go out with his white cane, but wanted a safer way to travel. Jywanza said, “I got my first guide from Guiding Eyes and it totally changed my life! I became more positive, more confident.” As a result, Jywanza felt safe enough to leave his family and travel the country, settling in Missouri, Virginia and now Indiana. “Guiding Eyes has given me so much over these past twenty-six years that I want to do my part and give back to the school with my time, resources and experience as a handler.”

Cindy LaBon shared her story. “I was a high partial until May, 2011 when I awoke in the morning with no vision.” An emergency visit to her eye doctor confirmed Cindy had a hemorrhage that brought on permanent blindness. Cindy went home and immediately called former Guiding Eyes staff member, Becky, telling her she wanted a guide dog. Several months of white cane training and her application approved, Cindy was at Guiding Eyes getting her first guide dog, Gardenia. “Everybody at Guiding Eyes is absolutely wonderful,” Cindy exclaimed. Team Cindy and Gardenia have had the opportunity to work with the Girl Scouts on earning their service animal badges, give presentations at Lions Clubs and answer questions/demonstrate guide work skills to puppy raisers in Montgomery County. Cindy feels she can give back even more by learning more while on the Graduate Council as she advocates for Guiding Eyes and promotes using a Guiding Eyes guide dog.

Liz did not have a question, but wanted to encourage graduates to apply if they have an interest in serving on the Graduate Council. “If you are not selected the first time, don’t be discouraged or deterred,” Liz continued, “submit a new application the following year.”

Kitty asked Liz if she could shed some light on what actually goes into the selection process.

Liz felt she was not at liberty to say specifically. Several Council members shared their thoughts and experiences; encouraging graduates to reapply if they are not selected, to answer all questions fully and to “sell yourself” on your application.

Q. Will the Council members and staff be meeting together for the Annual In-Person meetings?

A. They will be meeting virtually this year.

Rick thanked Liz for her expert leadership she provided last year through a sea of tumultuous times. “Thank you very much, we all appreciate it,” Rick stated.

Leslie Hamric with a few comments. “Liz, you’re awesome - I want to thank you for your outstanding leadership as well.”

Leslie reiterated what an awesome school Guiding Eyes is; the excellent dogs she has received and the support they give their teams compared to the two other schools her first and second dogs came from. Leslie concluded, “Thank you Guiding Eyes for the great work that you do and will continue to do in the future. It’s awesome to be able to give back”

Deborah feels the Graduate Council members experiences with other guide dog schools is a benefit for us; providing a balance. She also commented on the fact that Guiding Eyes serves people with a combined hearing impairment and many levels of blindness.

Thank you for joining us. We look forward to serving you, our Graduate Community and our school - Guiding Eyes for the Blind.

Your Graduate Council

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