Graduate Quarterly call, October 27, 2019, 7PM Eastern.

Moderator: Liz Bottner, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council President

Facilitator: Nicole Yarmolkevich, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council Corresponding Secretary

Presenter: Mike Goehring, Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (RGDMI) Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Topic: Misconceptions and Myths. Relates to calling the school for help with training, behavior and/or retirement.

Mike opened with a short preface. He has been with Guiding Eyes for the Blind for 11 years. He is the RGDMI primarily out west, although he has bounced around, as he put it, in the Home Training and Action Programs. Mike wrote an article for the last newsletter based on this observation; “over the last 24 months, some things could have been made easier if graduates had initiated contact with the school earlier.” He and other GEB staff realize there is concern among the graduates that their dog could be removed from them and not be given their dog back. They (the school) have a deep understanding of that fear. “At the end of the day, the goal is to always keep teams together when possible and safe. Safety is always the bottom line.”

The Q & A session ensued.

Nicole: What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of ownership of our guide dog?

Mike: Coming from my standpoint, I really don’t see an advantage or disadvantage to ownership in the way that it is done within our organization. If people choose to apply for ownership after the two-year mark, the organization reaches out to the RGDMIs asking if they have any objections to this ownership; hearing none, ownership is granted. That being said, you still retain follow-up services, veterinary services, and access to your veterinary fund. (Horowitz). Nothing really changes post ownership. However, the school contractually retains the right to remove a dog in extreme cases of neglect or abuse.

Nicole reiterated that grads would retain services after ownership, based on the submitted question.

Mike: Yes, nothing really changes. He continued noting that some graduates look at ownership as a milestone. “my dog and I have been together two years without any major red flags.” This group of people feel it is an achievement as a team to have ownership. “The school doesn’t go away; we’re still supporting you, we’re still supporting the dog, we’re still supporting the team.”

Nicole: When a dog is done working and retires, can the school help out with placement/adoption if the handler cannot find someone?

Mike: “Absolutely! That’s one of the beautiful things about Guiding Eyes. We pride ourselves in that we can facilitate the needs of the graduate and the retired dog.” GEB considers each case individually, whether you keep your retired dog, rehome the dog, or discover that keeping your dog became too challenging after you brought your new dog home. Mike begins a retirement conversation with his grads when their dog is 8 years old. This gives the handler plenty of time to have conversations with family, friends and staff evaluating what their options are. Ultimately, Guiding Eyes will work with each grad to do what is best for both the dog and the family. He addressed how tender a time it is for a handler retiring their first dog and transitioning to dog number two. “We want to handle that as gently as possible. The more time people have to adjust/adapt to that notion the better.”

Nicole summarized that Guiding Eyes will work with a handler on their dog’s placement regardless of the ownership status. Mike added that Guiding Eyes is “all over” helping a graduate find a place for their dog in a quality and appropriate home.

Nicole: Is there an arbitrary age when Guiding Eyes contacts a graduate about retiring their dog?

Mike: That conversation has taken place multiple times within the school. At this time, there is no hard and fast rule regarding an age at which a dog needs to retire. Right now, age 10 is a loose rule of thumb. At 10, generically speaking, a dog’s senses and physical capabilities start to diminish. Very often, guides will willingly step into the harness. We have to ask; is it fair to allow the dog to try to continue to do their job and is it safe. The dog’s vision and hearing may be deteriorating as well as aches and pains which the dog is very good at masking. These changes usually occur incrementally, so a handler may not notice as the team has made adjustments along the way. The RGDMI often sees these changes during a zone visit. They also factor in what the work load is like for the dog; suburban with low auto/pedestrian traffic or heavy city centers with high pressure/work challenges for the dog. Mike added that first time handlers often hear from other grads, “you’ll know when it’s time to retire your dog.” He suggested a handler cannot always know because the dog will want to please his owner and do the job that is asked of him.

Nicole: What tips would you give a handler that is having issues with their dog so they are not afraid to call the school?

Mike: Nothing has ever been resolved by waiting. The school relies on the handler to reach out for help since the handler knows their dog better than anyone. They will try to fix an issue in the field (home of the team). They want to keep the team together when possible opposed to bringing a dog back to campus for medical/work evaluation.

Nicole: I feel like every grad has this fear of calling the school if they notice an issue with their dog. What can you say to comfort us to call the school regardless of our fears?

Mike: The senior instructors have discussed this concern and feel bringing up this topic several times while a handler is in class is a means to lessen their fear. Remind grads the school’s goal is to keep teams together. Another thought by the school is to have this discussion during the home interview so the handler begins to feel comfortable early on; hearing the truth that they are accepting the reality that a dog, in very rare instances, needs to be returned to the school, whether for health or work issues. Mike stressed that there is never a benefit to prolonging a call to the school; things only get worse. He emphasized that a behavioral issue can reach a point of no return. This means a work pattern may reach a point that the dog will get back on track for a trainer that resolves the issue, but, once the leash and handle are handed back to the handler, the dog reverts back to what the dog and handler established together. Mike concluded by reminding us that the school’s goal is to keep the teams together and they work hard to make that happen. The sooner we call, the sooner they can “put us on their radar” and keep the team together. “Call and/or text/email whoever you feel most comfortable with; the trainer line at school, your field rep, class supervisor or trainer/instructor. Please, don’t wait to make that call!

Nicole summarized: “it’s better to be proactive than reactive.”

Nicole: If a dog is returned because it was a mismatch, is the dog evaluated and then reissued?

Mike: Reissue is tied to age. Generally, a dog 4-years or more is not reissued because the length of time to evaluate and retrain the dog reduces the working life of the dog. It is unfair to a handler to bond and connect with the dog for a shortened working career. Most of the time, mismatches are identified during class. Occasionally, a dog’s work is affected by the environment. For example, the dog handles city center work in small doses, but the daily grind of challenging work stresses the dog after a few months. In this case, the dog may be reissued to a handler in a suburban environment and work successfully for many years.

Nicole summarized: If a dog is returned early and/or mismatched, then reissued, it’s not likely the handler or school did anything wrong. Dogs have their own personalities as we do and can be affected by their new environment.

Mike added that he has had similar conversations with puppy raisers. A raiser may feel they failed/did something wrong that caused the puppy to not make it into class or be career changed. The reality is that about one-third of the dogs bred by Guiding Eyes make it to the finish line. Dogs that are identified early that are incapable of being a safe functioning guide dog is a success of its own. We all put in our best efforts, but sometimes, it just does not work out the way we hoped it would. When it happens, we take a deep breath and say, “we are going to learn from it and take away the positive.”

Liz opened up the call for questions from the participants.

Jessica (using an interpreter): “I am deaf/blind. I’ve suggested to other blind/deaf folks with dog issues that contacted me to call their school. I can try to help to some degree, but do tell them it is really important to call the school; that someone is always there to help.”

Mike: The grad network that Guiding Eyes has is amazing! Grad to grad can be a wonderful tool for after care support. However, grads need to remember that advice is often specific to the dog, handler and their environment. It is best to call the trainer line, if your instructor is not available, a report is generated that goes to anyone following that team. Everything is then documented as contact continues. This information/history gives the school power to do better. He added that a deaf/blind handler can request the Specialized Training department when calling in.

Liz: If you are not comfortable telling a grad that contacts you to call the trainer line, feel free to tell them to contact the Grad Council.

Kathy Lyons: I had a dog 18 months that was taken back because he had diabetes insipidus. I can’t help but wonder why it was not noticed during training that this dog had to pee every hour. Any comments?

Mike: I apologize and my heart goes out to you. We would never intentionally put a dog out that had medical issues. Hopefully, the vet and training staff can learn from this unfortunate placement.

Kathy Lyons: If they could do a urine concentration test, Diabetes insipidus would be detected early.

Mike: Maybe the Grad council could make note of this test and mention to the vet department.

Mike apologized; he had to leave. “It’s been an absolute pleasure and best wishes to everyone.”

There was discussion back and forth regarding a question submitted to the gebgradcouncil@gmail.com

Cindy Lou Altman’s concern was why her personal question about her dog she left on the trainer line voicemail was not followed up.

Kathy Lyons: “sometimes things fall through the cracks.”

Terry McCann: the staff does their level best to do, but we’re human and things do fall through the cracks. At some point, we need to use common sense and call back.

Linda Hunt: “I am hearing a lot about our fears. I’ve had two dogs that did not work out.” She feels she has a lot to share, having gone through the process of a dog being a mismatch. She thinks the Grad Council might facilitate a kind of session where people with mismatches/early retirement can get together and share.

Matt Brown: He understands people have fears of losing their dogs and noted all situations are very different. He’s had 6 dogs, had different reasons to call the trainer line and even had a RGDMI come out and never felt they would take his dog back. He thinks what has happened over the years is some grads have heard that some dogs have been removed; that it was not just an issue with the dog. Upon questioning/talking with a person that had their dog removed, he found there to be something underlying that is not being said.

Becky Davidson: “There’s two sides to every story.”

Someone chimed in and said it is not just Guiding Eyes that has removed dogs. “We can be a community that is a support system for each other.”

Sue Ellen: “I just went through this whole thing of my dog having an issue and found the school absolutely amazing.” She added everyone did everything possible, but unfortunately, the dog had to be returned.

Matt Brown: He thinks the school looks for the grad to be doing their level best too.

Deb: The RGDMI came for a visit and saw a problem with traffic checks, so took the dog back for a refresher training. During the three months, she never felt like she was in the dark. Deb was told what the identified problem was and how they would correct it. It was a true safety concern when the dog could not pass the traffic checks. She is now on dog number two.

Kay: “This is not just common to Guiding Eyes. At Guide Dogs for the Blind, people were always talking about the GDB police.” So many people felt like the instructors came for the home visit to pounce on any bad behaviors. She concluded, ”The help Fuji and I have gotten has made us into a phenomenal team.”

Terry McCann: “The nature of humanity is that a satisfied customer rarely makes any comments and the ones that feel cheated make all the noise.” You will hear from the disgruntled people via Facebook, because something did happen, more than likely a legitimate issue, but unfortunately, people don’t see the positive comments. It’s up to us to accentuate the positives in our school; share it on the grad list.

Matt Carello: “My first dog was taken back to school because she lost a lot of weight.” During the period of 3-4 months Delaney was there, they were very supportive and provided updates regularly. The dog gained weight and was reunited at home. Matt encouraged grads to not be afraid to call when an issue occurs. “Trust the school, they know what they are doing.”

Jennifer Woods (using an interpreter): “I am deaf/blind.” She took her dog to the emergency vet for stomach issues. “What is the rule for contacting the school on the weekend for follow up?”

Lin Hunnicutt: There is a 24 hour hotline that includes an option in the menu if you have an emergency.

Liz Bottner: The topic in general surrounds the whole fear thing. Fear is obviously a real feeling; there is a way through that fear. There is no judgement, Guiding Eyes is there to help ease that fear and there is no reason to prolong that fear.

Sue Ellen: Her fear was not that Enya would be taken away, but that she would not know how to fix the noise issue her dog was having.

Call ended after Nicole conducted roll call. (approximately 30 graduates attended)