Guiding Eyes Graduate Quarterly Call

Date: Sunday, January 31, 2021

Topic: It Takes A Village Part Two: Six graduates address questions from participating Puppy Raisers.

Panelists - Graduate Council Members:

Andrea Conner and Gretzky, second guide dog

Liz Bottner and Ocala, fourth guide dog/first running guide dog

Nicole Yarmolkevich and Pat, third guide dog

Deborah Groeber and Iris, sixth guide dog/first running guide dog

Abby Edwards and Kathy, first guide dog

Rick Ross and Leon, first guide dog

Moderator:

Liz Bottner, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council President.

Liz welcomed everyone and announced that an audio version and transcript of previous graduate calls is now available on the Guiding Eyes website.

Kerry Lemerise, Puppy Program Manager monitored the Zoom Chat feature; asking questions posed by participating puppy raisers as the call progressed.

Introductions, Questions and Responses from Panelists

Andrea:

Q. What made you want to get a guide in the first place and/or keep you in the program?

Q. Why did you first choose Guiding Eyes?

Q. What’s the funny story about a current or past guide that you keep sharing with everyone?

Andrea shared that her vision was failing over a period of time, which required O&M (orientation and mobility) instruction. While out on a winter day, she asked her instructor, “how in the world do blind people get around with a white cane in the snow and ice?” He responded, “with a guide dog.” Andrea put the wheels in motion, researching different schools. While on the phone with Guiding Eyes, the unknown person said, “choose a school that has been around a long time; they have more experience and an understanding of a first-time guide dog user that is losing their vision.” “This is exactly what I need; someone that understands,” Andrea said. She went through the application process, had her home interview and was given a class date for that same summer. Guiding Eyes was not only accommodating to her needs, but made her feel “understood.” Andrea was matched with Lopez, the love of her life, her soulmate as she put it. After seven years of successful guide work; Lopez retired. “Guiding Eyes knew me better than I knew myself,” Andrea declared. There was no question she would return to GEB for her second dog. Guiding Eyes understood Andrea had grown as a person and as a handler; that she had the confidence and skills for an energetic young dog. “Gretzky has a different personality and drive,” Andrea stated.

Although this is not a funny story, Andrea likes to share that Gretzky was attacked three times while in harness, bounced right back into work mode and, as a result, earned the title “resilient rebel.”

Liz:

Q. Why did you choose Guiding Eyes?

Q. What made you want to get a guide in the first place and/or keep you in the program?

“I did what I tell people not to do,” Liz said. She knew people that had dogs from Guiding Eyes so she only applied to GEB without doing any research. Liz continued, “I took a chance, luckily, that chance worked out and I have had four wonderful amazing experiences.” Liz returns to GEB because of the individualized training she has gotten: in the Action Accelerated Program and in the Running Guides Program. “I’ve done Action three times and the Running Guide Program as an add-on after graduating with Miss Ocala, my current guide,” Liz stated.

Q. What is the best way to approach a blind or visually impaired person in a crowded room when you want to introduce yourself? Is it appropriate to touch the person on the arm so they know you are speaking to them?

Liz explained that people have many different degrees of vision loss. Touching someone on the arm may startle them, causing the person to respond unfavorably. The best thing to do is say hello with their name if you know it; if not, you may have to say hello/excuse me several times before the blind person realizes you are talking to them. Speaking for myself, Liz said, “I’ve heard the voice and ended up talking to air more times than I can count.” “That’s awkward,” Liz chuckled.

Liz continued, “luckily, I have a guide dog with me 99.9% of the time.” Comments like ‘nice dog’ or ‘hey you with the dog’ are an indicator that someone is talking to her.

Q. If a stranger asks questions about your guide dog, is that okay or is that not appreciated?

Liz appreciates any questions, and added, “respect what answer you are given.” Some people may not be comfortable answering and not acknowledge a question. Liz also shared her thoughts on the curiosity people have regarding her blindness. She feels a level of disrespect when people ask a question, they probably wouldn’t ask their sighted peers.

Q. Booties – when are they used? Is there a trick to getting them on?

Liz puts booties on her dogs in both hot and cold climates. “The trick to getting them on the dog is definitely with a food reward,” Liz declared. She continued to say that during class, we introduce the booties the same way a raiser does with a young pup; keeping it short sweet and successful!

Q. What could a raiser do to facilitate a GEB pup’s ability to establish a positive relationship with his/her new “family”?

“socialize them every chance you get; take the pups anywhere and everywhere you possibly can,” Liz declared. You want to always follow the puppy raising rules while not overwhelming the pup all the while exposing the pup to new experiences. Liz encouraged the raisers to “draw out their spirit - foster that spirit - find a way to let that spirit shine through.” A dog’s quirkiness and personality need not be over-shadowed while the dog is listening to commands.

Q. Do you get an owner’s manual with your guide dog?

Liz chuckled, “yes, we do get a manual; it’s the puppy raisers!” Hopefully, a graduate will choose to have a relationship with their dog’s raiser and get that owner’s manual. Liz shared that she has had amazing relationships with three of her four dogs’ raisers. Aside from her current dog, Liz has placed her two previous dogs with their raisers after the dogs retired.

Q. What’s a funny story about a current or past guide that you keep sharing with everyone?

Liz shared that her previous dog, Dalton, and she were in New York City. As they approached a manually operated revolving door, Liz thought, “oh crap, I don’t know how to do this!” (They usually navigate the automatic revolving type with confidence and ease). “As soon as I started to go into the door opening, Dalton backed up lickity split and got himself on my right side as if to say you’re doing it wrong, this is how we do it,” Liz said with a chuckle. She refers to this as a “human 0 dog 1” moment; the dog definitely knew better than her.

Q. What have your guides done that:   ...really make you laugh; ...really make you mad; ...really make you smile each time they do it?

Liz struggled to find the words to describe why Miss Ocala makes her smile and laugh. “It is just her existing,” she declared, “if you knew this dog it would make sense to you.” Liz does not get mad at her dog, but does get frustrated. Liz has had to accept that Miss Ocala will get busy in her own time, even though Liz wants her to hurry up on a ridiculously cold day, but “I still love her though!”

Kerry asked Liz this question that came in from the Zoom Chat for her:

Q. How is the running guide working out for you?

Liz responded, “I do not have words to express how amazing it is!” Shortly after Liz graduated with Ocala in February, 2019, she was soon going to join an adaptive running group, Achilles International. A little birdie said, “let’s see if your dog would want to run” so Liz had her dog tested before they left the GEB campus. “Ocala passed with flying colors and then some,” Liz chuckled. By July, 2019, Liz had run two solo races and then two races with Ocala after they received their certification as a Running Guide Team. Even Ocala was awarded a medal for the first race she and Liz ran together. The pandemic has delayed them getting out to do what they want to do. “Every time I run with her, it brings me a smile,” Liz shared with a sense of awe. Guiding Eyes does not expect a Certified Running Team to only run competitively; they may choose to run casually.

Nicole:

Nicole introduced herself. She lives in Chicago where there is a foot and a half of snow on the ground and more is falling. Pat, her third Guiding Eyes dog, preceded by Flash and Jethro, is ecstatic; he loves to hop and jump in the snow. “It’s pretty cute to watch,” Nicole said. “I’m fortunate to be working from home half of the time, so no traveling.

Q. As you know, we spend almost a year and a half raising the pups, teaching them, and knowing their personalities. What would you find helpful in learning about your pup when you receive him that the raiser might be able to help you with?

Without hesitation, Nicole declared, “I want to know everything!” Interests may be as diverse as the teams, but for Nicole, she wants to know everything possible; how they grew up, did they have any illnesses, their favorite toys, how they treated their friends, their stories, and their quirks. Nicole concluded, “The more stories I hear – the more I get to know my dog and their puppy raiser.” Nicole loves the amazing relationships she has developed with all three of her dog’s puppy raisers.

Q. Does your guide dog ever get "antsy" or restless when asked to remain stationary for long periods of time? If so, how do you manage this? I imagine it is difficult during the pandemic when so many of us are working from home.

Nicole shared that she is a mental health therapist; working with individuals with severe mental illness that often cannot regulate their emotions.

She told Guiding Eyes that she needed a dog that could sit for long periods of time, a dog that was calm, a dog that didn’t react to emotions, a dog that could handle that kind of intense environment. “Pat is perfect,” Nicole said. He will get up if a coworker or client enters the room, but will respond to Nicole’s command, then settle himself in his kennel, his bed or the couch. Nicole confesses that she lost the battle with Pat over his staying off the couch. “He loves it!” she declared. Nicole rewards Pat’s compliance with active play during her lunch break and at the end of her work day. The pandemic has brought Nicole’s work duties home and Pat has shown the same patience and good behavior. He’s happy – he has his bones, toys and food!

Q. What have your guides done that:   ...really make you laugh; ...really make you mad; ...really make you smile each time they do it?

World War Three was a metaphorically fought battle between Nicole and Flash. Flash, Nicole’s second guide dog, stole her food faster than she could take a breath. He is now retired and enjoying life cleaning up crumbs from two elementary school aged children. Nicole shared a story about Flash that still makes her smile. “While I was in my Master’s Program and had a Practical Placement, I was doing therapy with a young child that refused to talk to or look at me,” Nicole said. She tried all the silly child-like tricks, but no connection until the day she decided to remove Flash’s harness and gave him permission to “go play” with the kid. The child looking up at that moment still warms Nicole’s heart. One more of Nicole’s favorite stories involves Flash. They were at a friend’s enjoying some poolside fun. Flash was running around the pool, slipped in and had to be rescued. “Apparently, my Lab couldn’t swim,” Nicole said. A short time later, they covered the pool water with a tarp. Nicole could not help but laugh as she shared that Flash had not learned his lesson and ran onto the tarp, not realizing the tarp was flexible and he would sink into the water! “Flash was a fantastic guide dog, but his life thinking concerned me,” Nicole stated.

Kerry asked Nicole this question that came in from the Zoom Chat for her:

Q. Do the raiser Region Manager notes come directly to you? Noah unmuted himself to clarify his question. He is not a puppy raiser, but takes the dogs out for runs to see if they actually like to run, then submits his notes to the Regional Manager.

Nicole confirmed that she does not have a running guide so could not be sure if his notes are shared with a handler. As far as Nicole learning as much as she can about her dog, she does this via telephone, social media and/or email with her dog’s puppy raiser.

Liz took a minute for a PSA. Wink. “Thank you all for raising or helping in any capacity that you helped getting these dogs ready. It does take a village and it continues to take a village even when they are active guides.”

Deborah:

With a chuckle in her voice, Deborah asked the sighted folks to “excuse how I look - that would be wonderful” as she had turn on her computer’s camera. She continued her introduction, “My name is Deborah Groeber and my sixth guide dog is named Iris: a running guide.” All of Deborah’s dogs have come from Guiding Eyes. “I am so glad you, our puppy raisers, could join us tonight,” she said, “it is you that determined what our guide dogs would be like the rest of their working lives.” A dog’s response, from horses to jack hammers, squirrels to high power hand dryers in a public restroom, children jumping in and out of a swimming pool to crowds at a stadium, all contribute to the success of a guide dog.

Deborah addressed Noah’s question and specifically anyone working with the Running Guides Program. The feedback they give to the Running Guide Specialist is logged in detail and often passed on to the students. Deborah shared that as she began running races with Iris, the dog would stop at some point and want to relieve. This consistent behavior gave reason for Deborah to contact Nick, one of the Guiding Eyes Running Specialists and voice her concerns. As he read the detailed log to Deborah, it was clear that the things that the dog was doing was consistent in the twelve group runs. Deborah chuckled, “if she did it then, she will do it now so I’ll have to be prepared.”

Q. What top 3 commands are used routinely and need to be absolute with prompt response by the GEB pup?

Deborah stated, “sit, come and leave it.” She emphasized the value of the sit command being a neutral and controlled position for the dog, the come command because it always brings the dog back to you if you are not in contact with the dog and leave it should you drop something or the dog starts sniffing when working.

Q. What are the most annoying dog traits noticed that might be addressed during “raising”?

A few of the behaviors Deborah does not expect to encounter with a new guide dog include; The dog that scavenges in wastepaper baskets, the dog that licks excessively which some people don’t appreciate, and/or the dog that takes food off a low surface. “I expect my new guide dog to be well behaved,” she stated emphatically. “If I leave the room, I expect my slice of pizza to be on the coffee table when I return,” she said. one of Deborah’s dogs was fortunately not hurt after it chewed a disposable razor the dog took out of the waste basket.

Q. I am currently raising my second puppy for GEB. My first one usually got busy right away and then we would go for our walk or out somewhere. My current puppy urinates right away but likes to walk a bit before having a bowel movement. It is my understanding that eliminating on walks during harness training is a reason for release. Do you have any advice for me?

As far as Deborah knows, an accident in harness is not cause for release from the program. Students are taught how to manage a dog that has relieved in harness or needs more time to empty. “Iris is one of those dogs that needs to walk a while to finish up her business,” Deborah said.

You asked what a graduate would do about this. Deborah stated, “you definitely want to run this by your Regional Coordinator first.” She continued to share her recommendations. When you are walking your harnessed dog, watch for indications that the dog may be ready to go – stop and give the dog a chance – then praise it up if the dog relieves. You may have to give the dog multiple opportunities for the dog to catch on that the harness comes off before relieving, which is followed by lots of praise.

Q. What’s a funny story about a current or past guide that you keep sharing with everyone?

Deborah’s third guide dog was typically not a scavenger, but couldn’t resist chewing gum. They would be at a baseball game and the dog would find the smallest piece of chewing gum in the grass. “He loved it,” Deborah chuckled, “he would not swallow it, just chew and chew.” This dog was so smart he knew to stop chewing if someone looked at him and he would hide the chewing gum in his mouth so no one could take it from him.

Kerry shared her thoughts and clarified some questions that were submitted in the Zoom chat box as a result of Deborah’s presentation.

Kerry laughed as she shared her vision of Deborah’s dog blowing a bubble!

She continued to talk about the “leave it” cue. On Puppy Program, the raisers actually teach an automatic “leave it” which means they don’t use a cue, the puppies are expected to leave the item by default. This can be confusing to raisers because the behavior is transitioned into an actual cue during training. Kerry wanted to make sure she was clarifying why raisers would not be using the words “leave it” while a pup is on program.

Deborah asked Kerry what a raiser does if a pill or bag of dog treats falls on the floor in front of the dog. Kerry responded, “we practice dropping things on purpose.” They start with the dog on leash, in a very controlled manner. They practice dropping things in front of the dog enough that the dog eventually learns that if they look at the raiser instead of the dropped food, they will get a food reward. “We want to get that pattern in place before the dog goes into training,” Kerry said. The trainers pair up that “leave it” cue so we (the graduate) will have a follow up with the dog if we are not sure what/where something is on the floor or ground. Kerry said emphatically, “It’s one of the first things we teach the puppies and practice it a whole lot.”

Deborah acknowledged how this trained behavior stays with a dog. Recently, her guide dog, Iris, was sitting at attention against the wall, watching as Deborah ate her dinner. When Deborah’s husband came into the room, he saw that a bag of dog treats had fallen and spilled onto the floor close to her dog. Iris knew well that she would be rewarded with two Charlee Bears for pointing out the spilled bag of treats.

Kerry responded, “I cannot tell you how happy that makes me – thank you for sharing and thank you raisers.”

Kerry touched on dogs that need to move to have a bowel movement. “it’s just the nature of some of the dogs,” she said. Some dogs need to do some walking and remember to let them relieve on cue.

Abby:

Abby Edwards got right into her story; sharing that she was matched with Kathy, her first guide dog, when she was 16 years old. In the seven years Kathy has been guiding Abby, they have navigated high school, college and grad school together.

Q. How long does it take to really become a team; to truly start working together?

Abby felt she and Kathy had a very rough start. Friends told her that it takes about a year to become a team, but Abby thought people were just being nice when they would say that, kind of like a guide dog equivalent of a bless your heart, honey. Abby admitted, “it actually does take about one year to learn to work together; for you to get to know your dog and your dog to know you.” Kathy has some funny quirks and mannerisms that took Abby some time to learn.

Q. What would you find helpful in learning about your pup when you receive him that the raiser might be able to help you with?

Abby suggested these few things; The dogs likes and dislikes, their mannerisms, what motivates them and how they react to things. Kathy has a quirky behavior that Abby would have better understood had her puppy raiser shared this endearing habit sooner than later. Abby refers to this behavior as a chin nibble. She describes it as, “a giant Lab face coming toward her face that is lovingly nibbling on her (Abby’s) face which is smiling with pride and joy. Bonding with my dog and building a relationship with her raiser has grown because of their communication. Abby has learned that Kathy would much rather play with another dog than people. Kathy’s raiser sent a photo of Kathy and another dog with a flower pot knocked over; apparently a mishap during playtime. “Fortunately, I had pet dogs for her to play with,” Abby chuckled.

Q. My dog relieves on harness, and my understanding is that it is cause for release. Do you have any suggestions for me?

Abby confessed that Kathy has struggled with relieving in harness for a lot of her working career. “it’s a battle of wills; cold, rain, snow and running late add to this challenge,” Abby admitted. This is not cause for release from the program. Abby had to make modifications to her routine that would allow more time for her and Kathy to take a little walk or jog before they go into Abby’s place of employment.

Q. What’s a funny story about a current or past guide that you keep sharing with everyone?

 “Kathy has a challenge problem solving off harness at times,” Abby said. One of Kathy’s favorite toys was poking through a slot on her toy box. When her attempt to get the toy through the slot failed, Kathy dragged the entire box to Abby and stood in front of her as if to say, “Mom, fix this for me.” Abby smiles every time she shares this story. Abby concluded, “I’m so grateful to all the wonderful work that you, as puppy raisers do; it’s amazing.”

Rick:

“Good evening all,” Rick began. He is a first-time guide dog user.

Q. What made you want to get a guide in the first place?

Q. Why did you first choose GEB and if different, why do you continue to choose GEB?

Rick would not take no for an answer when The Seeing Eye turned him down because he had “too much vision.” He explored other possibilities and subsequently found Guiding Eyes to be “right where I needed to be.” “It was an absolutely fabulous experience,” he said. the admissions process to placement in class occurred within a six-week period from start to finish. The companionship and the guidance from Leon especially going through his vision loss was more than Rick could have expected. Rick was around dogs all his life, breeding Golden Retrievers. Some of the pups ended up at The Seeing Eye. “So, it was a natural fit for me to go immediately to a guide dog,” Rick said.

Q. What’s a funny story about a current or past guide that you keep sharing with everyone?

Pre pandemic, Rick shared that he went to court twice per week with Leon at his side. The bailiff came out and told everyone to rise - without missing a beat, so did Leon.

Rick admits he and Leon have some issues that they have adjusted to. He added that Leon has many good qualities that outweigh the issues. Rick expressed his gratitude to the Guiding Eyes Community, especially the puppy raisers. “I don’t think I could keep a dog in my life a year to a year and a half, then give him up.”

Liz opened the program for questions and/or comments from the attendees.

Kathy Lyons has had many dogs from Guiding Eyes. “I would like to pass on a couple of things; first of all, my enormous gratitude for what you do, it’s fantastic.” One day when Kathy was at work, someone brought in some snacks and said the word cookie. Her dog jumped up as if he was getting a cookie. Kathy asked if raisers could use the word treat rather than cookie. Other than this, Kathy said, “you do such great work and I really appreciate it.”

Kerry read a question that came from the Zoom chat box.

Q. How has the pandemic affected guide dog users? For example, challenges with social distancing and sighted people’s reactions.

Liz knows of handlers that have been accused of not maintaining the six-foot distance rule. “It’s like they expect the dog to know,” she said. Liz, wanting to be respectful of the six-foot rule, has not gone alone to a store, but did go with an Orientation and Mobility Intern that was working on their needed hours for their internship. “It’s awkward not being able to see the arrows on the floor and go the wrong direction or approach a door that is temporarily blocked off,” stated Liz. “it’s a tricky thing, but life goes on and we do what we have to.

Q. Is their concern that the dogs have not been socialized enough during the pandemic?

The dogs coming in for their IFT are roughly the same, although the distraction level is higher, so need to work through that. Kerry said, “We have seen an incredible amount of creativity on the part of the puppy raisers to fill in the gaps.” It will be more difficult for the puppies that started out during the pandemic – their raisers had to find ways to get the experiences into the puppy. Kerry added they are pretty confident moving forward.

Stacy, a puppy raiser, wanted to address the panelist that said “one of the most important things is to get feedback from the puppy raisers.” Stacy would like to know what the best medium is for sharing her puppy’s photos and stories with the graduate – if there are alternatives and how to find this out.

Nicole suggested a raiser ask the graduate when they are together at the graduation or ask once the graduate has contacted you via telephone or email. If you have a book prepared ahead of time and bring it with you to the ceremony, you could sit together while you share your pup’s life and experiences. An electronic version with photos that are captioned is a good alternative; as well as recordings. So much depends on the graduate. It’s best to ask the person getting your gift– they know best.

Stacy thanked Nicole for her helpful information. “We don’t always know going in if the person wants contact or follow up contact. So, we go in there thinking, “this is the one time I may have to present whatever help and assistance and share sixteen months of a dog with somebody,” Stacy said. Nicole and Stacy chatted further that videos or narratives on a thumb drive may be another medium.

Liz turned on her computer camera so she could show the book her puppy raiser made for her. This book documents Ocala’s life: a photo on one side and a braille description and story on the facing page. “I will treasure this forever – it is truly a priceless gift,” said Liz. “Its value is indescribable; the photos and descriptions are all here. “Liz concluded, “I can share this book with anyone Whether you can see or not, you can read it and get to know my dog for who she is and who her raiser wanted me to know her as.”

Stacy thanked Liz and Nicole for their input. “Kudos to your raiser, Liz, for the fore thought and the effort that went into putting something like that together. I never would have thought of something like that. So, thank you to both of you and your raiser for that.”

Susan:

She shared that she has had six guide dogs, five of them from Guiding Eyes. One of the reasons Susan chose GEB was that she could have contact with the puppy raisers. “I will take information you want to share in any form,” she declared. If someone is not available to read and describe any photos, there is another option called Aira, an interpreter service in real time that a subscriber can access via the camera on their cell phone or computer. Susan emphasized, “Any way you want to share the information about the experiences with our dog is valuable to us. Thank you very much.”

Andrea chimed in, “Any form at any time, even if it is weeks or months after our graduation with your puppy is appreciated – it increases our bond with our dog and with you, our puppy raiser.”

Kitty:

Kitty and Gianna, her third Guiding Eyes dog, live in Cincinnati, Ohio. She chose GEB because she needed flexibility due to medical issues and her work schedule. Her field rep, now known as a Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructor, encouraged her to apply for the Home Training Program. “If you don’t ask, you won’t know,” he told her.

Kitty continued with a question.

Q. Are puppies exposed to the head collars, be it the gentle leader, halty or any other type?

Kerry confirmed that some, not all, of the puppies on program do have experience with a head collar.

Gerald added that all the dogs do wear a head collar at some point during their training. They want to make sure the dog is comfortable with them, that they can work with them and be good with them in basic heeling. They try to do it in class and home training too. Gerald encouraged us to occasionally put it on our dog so the dog is accustomed to wearing it in the event we need to put it on our dog. It’s the same with booties; some dogs transition easily if they haven’t worn them in a while and others need to get used to them again.

Kitty made one last comment – addressing the discussion around our dog’s being well behaved when we get them home. That is very helpful, but Sunstar taught her that she needs to manage her environment as well. She can put a lid on the trash can to stop her dog from getting into the garbage and put the paper out of the dogs reach so she doesn’t destroy it.

Joy:

She asked if a questionnaire form could be developed that puppy raisers could fill out with information about their puppy. Some items on the form might be; are they rough chewers, do they like to be brushed, what types of toys do they like to play with, etc.

Kerry is intrigued by this idea and would like to connect with Joy to further discuss this. Kerry thinks this might be a way to get a conversation going between the graduate and their dog’s raiser.

Kerry shared her final thoughts, “You can’t imagine how amazing it is to see the dogs with you and have conversations with you, so thank you for coming and talking to us.”

Liz, in closing, “I just want to thank every single one of you in attendance for coming and joining us – allowing us to share the impact that the raisers have on us and our guides in setting them up for success. Without you, we would not have these dogs, said respectfully, of course, to the trainers and everyone else involved. It starts with you, and in some cases, it ends with you in terms of being able to retire the dog back with their puppy raiser.”

Any questions or comments can be emailed to:

 gebgradcouncil@gmail.com

If we cannot provide an answer, we will send it up the chain for someone that can help.