Guiding Eyes Graduate Quarterly Call

Date: Sunday, October 25, 2020

Topic: It Takes A Village: Four Puppy Raisers Share Their Insights On Puppy Raising.

Panelists:

Samantha Epstein, Finger Lakes Region

Holly McGuire, Virginia Beach - Prince William Region

Paula Weronski, Erie County Region

Tara Schatz, Southwestern Vermont Regional Coordinator - Southwest Vermont Region

Moderator: Liz Bottner, Guiding Eyes Graduate Council, President

The call features four puppy raisers who will be sharing their experiences of puppy raising.

Samantha (Sam) Epstein:

Sam has raised in the Finger Lakes Region starting at Ithaca College. She started raising after seeing a puppy while in college. She freely admits that she "ignored the vest" and "went running as fast as [she] could directly to the puppy and pet without asking". Sam worked her way through the club, got certified with Guiding Eyes and started raising her first dog, Ocala, as a Sophomore in college. She left at the start of her Junior year to study abroad. After coming back from studying abroad, Sam realized that she "could not do school or life without raising a puppy" and raised Elaine, who was medically released. Elaine is the half-sister of Ocala.

The club at the college is designed to help students work and live around service dogs. Before raising Ocala, Sam had no idea how to live around service dogs with all of the etiquette and then started certification to become a raiser. Sam started the process in her Freshman year.

Answers to Submitted Questions:

How early did you start taking your pup to class?

Sam: I actually started taking pups to class at four months old, which was quite interesting. Miss Ocala was perfect. She settled perfectly in the first class I took her to. Miss Elaine decided to start barking in the middle of my first class, so we had to leave and figure out exactly how to handle that situation, which was definitely a learning lesson, but it was great to learn.

Sam e-mailed the professors before class began to see if it is okay to bring the dog to class as well as asked the class on the first day if it is okay to bring the dog.

How was it juggling college and training a guide dog?

Sam: It's pretty similar to anyone else who is going to work and training a guide dog. It's of course such a huge part of your life, but at times school does have to come first and you can't go on those long walks and you can't go on those long hikes, but it is really, really special to be a college student and to have a pup along with you throughout the whole ride. For me, I do believe it was quite comforting to know that there was a pup by my side; it was very grounding and it was very humbling to know that something I was doing was in some way in the future going to benefit the world, even if I had no idea what my degree was gonna do for me. It was a really cool experience. It taught me responsibility; it taught me what it meant to care for another life as I'm trying to care for my own life and made me very aware of what needed to be done in order to do all those great things as well as have a social life on the side of all that. It also taught me what it is to have a really amazing friend group who recognizes the sacrifices that need to be made in order to have a puppy with you all the time. Shoes are gonna be ripped up. Roommates have to be understanding of that as well. It’s a really, really special experience and I'm very thankful for it.

How do you know when a pup has that extra special trait that sets them apart and can you tell us about a pup like this?

Sam: Ocala was special right from the beginning. I knew that just because she cared so, so much about every single person she was with any time, all the time. It was a really special feeling to be loved by Miss Ocala. I'm not exactly sure if I can tell you what that trait is. I think it's just having a giant heart and just caring so much about everyone else, even if it means not caring about yourself, and I feel like Ocala does that very, very well. She's just a very selfless pup. We love that about her; she is such a special pup. I think Miss Elaine is very special in her own way. She definitely does not have the whole selfless thing, though. Elaine will always put herself first and I respect that about her - I think that's pretty cool - but Miss Ocala really changed the world just by being the selfless pup she was, and I absolutely loved that. It was really nice to be around such a wonderfully happy being all the time.

A special moment with a Graduate:

Sam: I think that moment is when I first met Liz. I was lucky enough to be able to come to graduation and I know that so many puppy raisers are not able to do that right now, because of the situation that our whole world is in. I find myself extremely, extremely thankful that I had that time. Being able to meet Liz and her family and seeing how absolutely amazing her and Ocala worked together and how Ocala - that caring that she had for me just moved right over to Liz and Liz was her whole world. It was quite a beautiful moment and I'm so thankful that I was able to have that and experience that with the Guiding Eyes family. It was really lovely. So, thank you so much, and I hope I can answer any questions in the future. I look forward to hearing the rest of the panelists.

Holly McGuire:

Holly is currently raising her eighth dog for Guiding Eyes named Steel. Holly "got into Guiding Eyes" when her daughter was about five years old. She "really wanted to teach her about sacrifice and just doing something for someone else, because you know kids these days - they seem to pretty much have everything on demand as quickly as they want it, and I just really wanted to show her - she had a deep love of animals - to show her that she can sacrifice something and she can do hard things for other people". We were homeschoolers and I saw a bookmark in the library for Guiding Eyes for the Blind and picked it up, called and started getting the training. It's been a really great experience so far. I've really enjoyed that.

Answers to Submitted Questions:

How do you know when a pup has that extra special trait that sets them apart and can you tell us about a pup like this?

Holly: It's funny, because Sam was talking about her dog and I don't know if maybe it was a confidence thing for me, but - and my friends pointed this out to me -that every single dog I raise, I say to my friends “I don't think this dog's gonna make it. I don't know if I'm doing a good job.” Holly adds that all but one of her eight dogs have made it and the one that did not was medically released from the program. Holly goes on to say that all of the dogs are special, but each is different. Her current dog is "super quirky. He's just a funny, chill dog". She further states that several dogs previous - Dozer and Jeeter, in particular - were very high-energy dogs.

What was your most embarrassing moment with a dog?

Holly: The first four dogs went to the bathroom in Walmart. Each dog was older at the time - eight or nine months old. I also had a dog who was walking by and nosed a ceramic cookie dish or something and two or three of these ceramic cookie dishes just fell off and smashed everywhere. I'm standing there with broken cookie jars and a dog and that was pretty embarrassing, as well. It's all part of the training. I expect my dogs to make mistakes, because they are little and they have to learn. It's just part of having a dog.

What is a funny thing that your dog does?

Holly: I think one of the funniest things that my guide dog puppies ever did was with my dog Dozer. I would ask him if he was gonna come with me. These dogs are smart and they know I'm getting ready to leave. I would either tell him no, and so that meant he was gonna go into his crate, or I would say "Are you coming?" to him and if I said "Are you coming?", he knew it was time for him to go with me and he would just start bouncing up and down on all fours, super high like three or four feet up in the air. That is probably one of the funniest things my dogs have ever done.

Do you discourage tug-of-war play?

Holly “No, not at all. We have toys specifically for tug-of-war.” When the dogs are playing with other dogs - pets or other guide dog puppies - we always try to have them have toys to play with so they're not wrestling and biting each other. Tug-of-war is encouraged. We use anything, but they don't want us using the plush toys. Holly adds that this is because it can be confusing to the dogs when they see stuffed animals.

Has puppy raising changed due to COVID?

Holly: “Yes, very much. I feel like Steel - 13-months old - is a little bit behind right now. We don't have the classes in-person, which are valuable to the dogs to see each other with dog distraction. Guiding Eyes has also asked us not to do any people greetings, which has been challenging with my current dog, because he is very, very much a people person.” If he even sees a person, I have a hard time near me, connected to me and not lunging. If we're sitting on a park bench somewhere and a person walks by, he just really wants to go towards them and if that person approaches, it's just been really difficult keeping him calm and having him not jump up. Normally by this time, people greetings are not much of a problem at all. It's something that a more mature dog like him should be able to handle, but he's not handling that; we have some work to do with that. Holly adds that she will also have him longer. He will go back when he is about two years of age.

Do you do anything in memory of your dog when the dog goes to IFT?

Holly: I personally don't necessarily do anything, but the region - Virginia Beach - when I first started and for several years, would have a helium balloon and it would say "Good Luck" with the dog's name on it. We were absolutely required - almost - to keep that balloon until the dog graduates. It was more of a superstitious thing, but it was fun. We would keep the balloons until the dog graduated as a good luck type thing. I think that's about it from me. I hope you guys learned some things and I'll be happy to answer any questions, as well.

Paula Worenski

Paula thanked Nicole for asking her to be on the call. Paula has been a puppy raiser for "quite a few years, but not necessarily a lot of dogs". She states that both she and her husband work full-time and would get a puppy when her son was off from college. When her husband came back from Iraq, they wanted to do service dogs, more for the military. Paula was working at a vet hospital and got to see blind people come in with their dogs and was so impressed as how much the dog and the person worked together as a team. She and her husband saw a penny saver ad in the paper "Puppy Raisers Wanted" and she answered the ad. She further states that the team in Erie is "wonderful as far as training us, giving us confidence and stuff like that". She adds that with her first pup, Cosby, she was terrified of destroying "this little dog or his confidence or something like that. He was so little, so cute". She further states that the region helped her along in the raising of Cosby and training she and her husband how to be puppy raisers. She states that she has raised four dogs, but the fourth dog was medically released.

Answers to Submitted Questions:

Do you use the word "treat" or "cookie"?

Paula: I guess we use the word "treat". You don't even realize you're saying it sometimes, but definitely treat.

What was your most embarrassing moment with a dog?

Paula: I agree with Holly. Nicole, it happened with Pat. It was the only time it ever happened. We were in Lowe's and were walking in the furthest aisle of the store and Pat pooped. We are always encouraged to have a bag; I had nothing. We scurried through the score, found a piece of paper and cleaned it up. It happens. She states that she just "hopes it never happens with you folks".

Special moment with a graduate:

Paula: My son and I got to go to the graduation and meet Ashely - spend some time with her, get to know her. I think it makes a great difference. Paula adds that she wishes she could go to graduation with everyone, but was not able to do so. Paula states that she hoped it helped Ashley, too, when Fuller retired and went back to his puppy raisers that she had the connection with her raisers and they with her.

Do you do anything in memory of your dog when the dog goes to IFT?

Paula: Not really, but we do spend a lot of time talking about our favorite memories of the dog during suppertime and stuff like that.

Is it recommended or discouraged that friends and family make eye contact with your puppy while he/she is wearing the vest?

Paula: Most of my friends are so well-trained that they don't interact with the dogs until they're allowed to. The circle of friends that you have - that you interact with the dog with - it's so important that they act properly. It really helps a lot. It helps the dogs out - it helps them understand what is required of them, what they should be doing and shouldn't be doing. Paula adds that they would bring their dogs to church where there is a large population of little kids who would be running around when church was dismissed and the dogs learned how to behave in that environment - relax.

Do you discourage tug-of-war?

Paula: No. There are rules when the dogs get too rough, the game is stopped.

Is there one particular command or behavior that is easier to teach?

Paula: For me, it's "come". I think "come" can be a life-saver if something happens - if you drop the leash. It is an easy command. There's always a treat involved; there's the excited voice. That's my favorite. When they want to come to you and be with you. I think that's awesome.

Is there one particular command or behavior that is more difficult to teach?

Paula: I think it depends on the dog. She adds that with Fuller, that command was "over", which used to be a command they would teach, but do not do so anymore.

What types of toys do you have for the pups?

Paula: It changes up a lot. She mentions hard bones, soft balls. She adds that the Erie Region has braided rope toys that the Girl Scouts make. She states that the size of the toy is also important. She further adds that changing the toys out makes it more fun for the dogs.

What form of behavior modification do you use for puppies?

Paula: I am usually a very quiet person, so my commands are very quiet. Erie Region encouraged me to keep on talking to the dog at different levels. Be more excited when they're young and more mellow as they get older. They will learn to stand on themselves and not always be encouraged. Paula adds that the change in voice can help depending on the situation

Funniest moments of a pup?

Paula: Cosby (her first pup) flipped the oak coffee table four times into the dining room when he was a tiny puppy. Pat, on his second-to-last day before leaving for IFT, took off leash and ran into the nearby creek. He ran back afterwards and was fine.

Are you instructed to always relieve the pup on leash?

Paula: Yes, or in a fenced-in yard. Paula adds that she finds housebreaking is a lot easier done on leash. She also states that she changes up the relieving surface. She also states that puppies will relieve themselves during play when they are young and she does not correct for that.

Has puppy raising changed due to COVID?

Paula: COVID has definitely changed how raising is done. Paula states that lessons would be done online as well as by phone. The raisers would video their pups doing things. She adds that it's hard raising during COVID. Paula further states that she is looking forward to getting another pup.

Tara Schatz:

Tara has been raising puppies since 2007 and is currently raising her tenth puppy. Tara started with the Capital Region and in 2017, she helped start the Southern Vermont Region, which officially got off the ground in 2018. Tara states "it's been really cool to be a part of it from the very beginning and kind of build it up". There are currently nine puppies in the region and Tara serves as the regional coordinator.

On adopting a retired dog, Tara states that of the ten puppies she has raised, she has been offered the ability to adopt one - Flynn, her third pup, who retired in 2017. She further states that she and her husband were very excited to have him back (the decision to adopt him took "five minutes" of discussion) and he has helped them raise five pups in the time he has been with them. Tara adds: "He's a great role model. I don't know how puppy raisers have four or five dogs, but we just have our current puppy that we're raising and Flynn". She states that sometimes it is hard taking both dogs out together. She adds that for exercise, taking them out together is fine, but when she's training her current pup, she will take the pup, Melinda, out separately. She further states that it is "very hard to leave him home" so that she can do training with Melinda. She also states that with Flynn, who is retired, there are different rules than with Melinda, pup-in-training. Tara adds that "the other great thing about having a retired guide dog is that he kind of fills a hole when our puppies have to go back to Guiding Eyes. It was always really sad [when] we'd clean up all the toys and sweep up all the dog fur. It was just a "very empty feeling" not having a dog in the house". He states that Flynn gives us extra love... It's been really awesome having Flynn back. I just never thought that we would get that chance. Just all of you know that if you're in a position where you can't keep your dog after he or she is finished working, the puppy raisers or somebody will always, always, always welcome, welcome them back into our homes. They're like the hero of the guide dog community, these retired dogs".

Graduate Questions:

Judy: She wanted to know the reasons for the pups being medically released.

Holly: One dog was medically released because of a soft trachea. She adds that the place that the harness fit on the front of his chest area wasn't compatible with that area.

Sam: Elaine was medically released, because she had some skin conditions, a lot of ear infections and a big hot spot that "we were able to catch in time, thankfully".

Paula: Richie was released because his paws were starting to curl. At six months, he was released.

Tara: We've had two medical releases; one for skin allergies and another also for a soft trachea.

Linda: She stated that she accompanied her retired guide, Ada, to North Carolina to be returned with her puppy raisers, Barbara and Tony. Linda states "it was really an emotional experience for all". She adds that her dog's puppy raisers were crying and Ada guided Linda right to them. Ada did recognize them. "The hard part was that nobody wanted to leave". She further adds that Ada seemed unsure at first as to who to go with, but Linda told Ada to "go have fun and adventures". Tony said "Part three of Ada's adventures: Let's go!". Linda adds: "and they were off!".

Linda: How do you all feel about having some sense of what's happened to your dog? Do you feel like you need to know what's happened?

Tara: I definitely think that it's important. I always try to keep tabs on where my dogs are all the time, but especially when they're getting older and I wonder what's happening. She states that the school does update them, but only basic information, such as if the dog is retired. Tara adds: "I think about my dogs - every single one of them - every single day".

Sam: I do think I'm possibly one of the luckiest raisers in the world to be able to have such a wonderful relationship with Liz and still be able to keep in touch with Miss Ocala any time I want. And of course, Liz has all access to me as well - we are very lucky, I feel, to have each other and to still be able to have Ocala in both of our lives in whatever way that means and I'm so thankful for that. I do feel like if in the future I would like to - if I'm able to raise again - to be able to keep tabs on my dog. I think we all know how fortunate we are to be able to have our time with these pups and be able to spend time with them and hopefully being able to keep in touch and keep tabs on their lives for the rest of their life is a wonderful feeling and I'm very, very thankful that I'm able to do that with Liz and Ocala - absolutely!

Holly: I have a wide variety of contact with the dogs I've raised from pretty regular contact with Gretsky and Andrea and Rory and Jeeter to really not hearing anything at all from some of my dogs. My region really helped me with the expectations [related to this]. Holly adds that she has had one dog who has since passed away with whom she had moderate contact with the handler. She states that the graduate contacted her and let her know what was going on with her dog (Johnny) and asked if she wanted to come up and spend some time with the dog prior to the dog passing away. Holly states "I'm happy knowing that they're all Guiding Eyes for the Blind dogs and I don't have to worry about them as far as if they're going to be dropped off at the SPCA or something like that. Guiding Eyes will always take care of the dogs, given any circumstances. I think that really gives me a peace knowing that".

Paula: I so appreciate that Ashley felt that we were good enough to have Fuller back. It is such a privilege to have him back. He has a purpose to raise more guide pups. I couldn't imagine a house without a dog. We would always have a dog. Our home is always open to any of our dogs that need to be retired; they will always be loved and cared for. There is a ramp outside for when they get old. We are always here for them. To keep in touch with the graduates and our dogs is priceless for us. I keep in touch with everyone and it is wonderful; we thank you for that, to share with us.

Joy: If you had a chance if you couldn't keep in contact with the client, would you ever consider doing a form with what some of their habits and traits are, as well as sharing stories?

Holly: I do keep in contact with the handlers and I do give them as many stories and as much information as I can about the dog. She states that one of her dogs had been hit by a car as a puppy and she told the graduate about it. She also states that she was able to tell another graduate about a scar on the dog's nose that the dog got as a puppy from being bit by a dog. Holly adds that in the beginning, she probably knows more about the dog than the handler does and readily transfers any information.

Kathy: Kathy wanted to let Tara know how "incredibly grateful I am for you to raise the best dog I’ve ever met". Kathy adds that Tara was able to see Nacho working in Kathy visiting Vermont. Kathy wanted to know what that was like for Tara to see Nacho work.

Tara: That experience was - and probably will always be - one of the most treasured memories I have. She adds that Nacho got to go back to the school where he was raised and see all the kids that helped make his career be a success. "It was magical, that's all I have to say. It was just awesome".

Holly: Holly states that she has gotten to see Rory and Jeeter twice thus far. She values that experience. She adds that Jeeter did remember her, but was not confused about whose dog he was and what he was doing. "For me, there was no 'I wish I could take him with me'. It just... wasn't like that. It was just perfect. Everything was right, the way it should be".

Sam: Everything that both Holly and Tara just explained are exactly what I felt when I was lucky enough to also visit Liz and Ocala and see Ocala work. It was just such a beautiful experience to see even some of the commands that we teach them that Liz went ahead and did as well. It was just a very, very special experience, as Holly said, going back to who they go to at the end of the day - it just made the perfect sense and it was exactly where she belonged. To give Liz and Ocala the biggest hug in the entire world and then head on my merry way, knowing that Ocala and Liz are in the best hands possible - it was such a special moment for sure.

Paula: I have not seen one of my pups work with someone and I know I'm missing something there. It's almost like part of the story is missing for me. She adds that she knows they do well, but to see it "would be special".

Sheila: She wanted to thank the puppy raisers for everything they have done. She adds that she officially adopted Pumpkin as her puppy raisers were unable to adopt her. She further states that she is awaiting her next dog.

Deborah: She questioned Holly what month and year Dozer graduated, possibly in 2017.

Holly: Dozer graduated after 2017.

Deborah also asked whether or not the puppy raisers had been given any guidance on licking and/or puppy biting being a negative thing.

Holly: All my puppies will outgrow the biting stage. As far as licking, she adds that her current dog tries to lick you in the face, if allowed. She states that this is not something she has heard be addressed in any of her dogs.

Tara: There are some habits that have never been addressed previous, but are starting to be addressed now. Tara states that licking is one of them as well as is not having the dog go in between the legs.

Paula: She states that her current dog is "horrible" about running in between the legs, despite trying to work on this behavior. She adds that she knows in the Erie Region it has been mentioned that graduates do not like to be licked, so "we do discourage it. You get that kiss and that's it". Paula mentions that this is especially difficult with strangers at first.

Sharon: Sharon comments that she has had the "great pleasure of spending several visits with Cameo's puppy raiser". She adds that Cameo was raised on the University of Delaware campus when her puppy raiser was a senior in college. She further states that she was planning on visit her raiser shortly, but it was decided that it would be safer to not meet right now. Sharon states that "it's been great to be with her and I appreciate all the comments that you ladies have shared and all the work you've done, because without you, we wouldn't have these guys as well as they are". Sharon tells of a time when she was visiting her puppy raiser and her puppy raiser's family and one of the family members comment on how well she and Cameo were working, that they were "quite a team".

Judy: How long has the club at Ithaca College been around? Is it a steady, growing club? Are there any other colleges or universities that are doing that type of thing?

Sam: Ithaca College has had our GEB club going on for about thirteen years. It started out small and is growing a ton now. It's kind of at a steady rate now. We kind of try to certify about seven to eight people each semester, just so that we're keeping people coming in certified as the Seniors graduate. We try to keep it [small]. We don't want a ton of people doing it. The truth is that it takes a very specific college student to be able to raise a puppy in college. She adds that "it takes a very specific person who is able to care for another life as they're caring for their own through a very, very stressful experience - which is college, of course! We try to stick with people who we really think are really motivated and really wanting to be a part of such a beautiful community like Guiding Eyes. We work really hard to make sure that we're choosing the right people. Luckily, we seem to be doing a great job, because the Ithaca College group has really rocked, it has really raised some wonderful dogs". Sam adds that Cornell University, also in the Finger Lakes Region, has a puppy raising club. She states that there are possibly four or five other such campus clubs. She states that each club tries to communicate with each other, but each club has its own community based on each campus, due to puppy raising being "such a personal experience".

Deni: She mentioned that with the help from a puppy raiser from Southeastern Guide Dogs, she had started a puppy raising group at the University of South Florida where she teaches. Deni said that it had been very successful and were working very much like the group at Ithaca.

The group has been beneficial to faculty, staff and students alike. She also stated that the college was able to establish a wing in one of the dorms with suites for members of the puppy raising club, where four students reside in one suite and taking turns with the duties of raising the puppy, with one student being assigned as the primary raiser. She also suggested that a faculty advisor be established to coordinate with university faculty and the legal team.

Dawn: She shared a puppy raiser story of her first guide. She states that she recently called her puppy raiser the day before the call and each was able to share related to the love and bond each had with Dawn's first guide. She also states that she and the puppy raiser had a lot in common. She also thanked the puppy raisers.

Liz: I just want to thank Holly, Paula, Tara and Sam for joining us; for speaking with us; for sharing your time with us and your love for raising with us.

A role call was then conducted with graduates using the guides' birth month to introduce themselves.

Liz: Thank you to the puppy raisers. Yes, you give a puppy up when you give them back to the school and they go away to college, but you gain so much more by doing that. If you want it, you gain a family - you gain a greater family; your family becomes bigger. Whatever the dog decides to do after it leaves you, it always makes you proud. Thank you for raising; we truly would not have these dogs if it were not for the raisers. I am truly grateful to have been able to keep in touch with three of my four dogs’ puppy raisers, most currently that of Miss Ocala. Reach out, if you can, as graduates to your raisers. I'm sure it means more than I can even express in words. Thank you all for attending this call this evening. If any of you have any feedback, please either feel free to get in touch with any of us individually as Council members, or send any comments, concerns or questions to gebgradcouncil@gmail.com.