Guiding Eyes Graduate Quarterly Call, July 31, 2022 Recap

Topic: Equipment and Support Services

Melissa Carney, Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager, welcomed everyone. She was excited to announce thatguest speaker, Miranda Beckmann**,** Guiding Eyes Foundation Managerwas with us to discuss equipment and helpful tools for graduates.

Andrea Conner, Graduate Council President, welcomed attendees and thanked everyone for joining the call.

Graduate Council members: Becky Davidson, Vice President, Cindy LaBon, Recording Secretary, Deborah Groeber, Jywanza Maye, Nate Kile and Tyler Shaffer introduced themselves.

Becky introduced Miranda, stating Miranda manages the equipment room and that her role there consists of much more than harnesses and leashes.

Miranda greeted everyone. She restated her position as the Foundation Manager. In this role, she oversees the foundation of guide dog training. She works closely with Stephanie Koret, Placement Manager and Caryn Fellows, Interdepartmental Program Coordinator. This team facilitates good matches between dog and student.

Miranda was a class supervisor for 17 years. During these years, she worked closely with Dell Rodman. She feels he helped throughout various stages of her career, guiding her in directions that were thought-provoking. She decided she wanted to take a more active role in the foundation of guide dog training.

As the Foundation Manager, Miranda does final preliminary and blind-fold evaluation upon completion of each dog’s training, as well as traffic check safety. She keeps close tabs on where each team of instructors are during earlier phases of training.

Miranda has a love and appreciation for the equipment that Guiding Eyes uses. She acquired that love from her mentor, Graham Buck. He would point out various things from guide dog teams that helped her gain a better understanding and becomemore proficient in assessing the role equipment has on each individual team. Graham showed her the importance of the foot fall of the student in relation to the guide dog when working. She pointed out that matching the student with the proper equipment helps the team get into a good, natural stride. It takes time and a lot of work by both the handler and the dog to achieve this. The fluidity of the team is also affected by pace, pull and environment.

When Miranda first started at Guiding Eyes, all the students had the same style of harness and handle, although, there were three sizes; small, medium and large. The selection of handles is quite large now, filling an entire wall in the equipment room. The correct handle helps the student establish and maintain an optimal following position.

Miranda talked about her first introduction to a shorter style handle. Rachel, a student who was not very tall, had been matched with a longer guide dog. After this experience, Guiding Eyes started getting other lengths and styles: offset, ergonomic and harp handles.

American Leather, a mom & pop business owned and operated by Dave and his wife, produce leashes and the traditional leather harness, customizing equipment as needed. They supply Guiding Eyes and 26 guide dog schools, internationally as well.

Miranda continued her presentation - the inception of the Unifly harness.

This harness was originally produced for the Running Guides Program. It was developed so the dog would have free motion of its front legs while running. When exploring this new harness, Guiding Eyes wanted to make sure that it had a backup supplier to provide harnesses in the event that American Leather was unable to continue providing equipment. In addition to considering a backup supplier for harnesses, the school wasn’t sure if a leather harness was the best thing for a running guide dog. Ruffwear manufactures several harness designs made from a combination of nylon, polyester, webbing and other materials.These harnesses enable a dog to pull into the harness, such as in skijoring.

Thomas and Ben worked closely with MIT in the design process of the handle. They wanted the handle to be versatile and customizable to the individual.

The final Unifly model went through several iterations. Sometimes the harness had modifications sewn in by GEB’s head of maintenance. They had regular and ergo handles in some of the earlier prototypes. In conjunction with this, Guiding Eyes took the information from MIT to Ruffwear, who took the concepts and designs and played a major role in the current finished Unifly harness.

If anyone is not familiar with the Unifly, it is a more robust version of a typical hiking harness. It has a chest piece that goes between the dog’s front legs and connects to the back piece with nylon straps. Inside the back piece there are thicker webbing pieces that assist in giving feedback where the handle attaches to a cleat, based on a cross country ski.

At one time Miranda was very married to the traditional leather harness - it was very hard to let it go. She had some students who were into hiking. As Miranda worked with them, she became comfortable with the Unifly. Now, during training, she goes between a traditional leather harness and the Unifly about 50/50.

The size of the Unifly is very important. It is imperative that the harness fit snugly around the guide dog in order to give feedback to the handler through the handle.

Over the last couple of years, Miranda has had some dogs with a lot of pull. She feels that using the Unifly with them can provide a calming effect. It can also absorb some of the pull that can be physically taxing. Miranda is using the Unifly harness, but will never give up the traditional leather harness!

Both harnesses have their strengths and weaknesses. They are both versatile and can be customized. They used to be priced similarly, but now, the leather harnesses are more expensive. Ruffwear has not raised their prices, as of yet. The Unifly harness and handle are around $280. The leather harness is a little more expensive; the body can run $150 and depending on the handle style, $125 to $150.

The next part of Miranda’s presentation - how the harness and harness equipment has progressed over the years.

She described the iterations of the evolution of the harness, handles and the various hardware to attach the handle to the harness body. She explained the challenges with each style and the progression of designs.

Miranda went on to speak about harness signs and/or pouches, available for purchase at Guiding Eyes.

The harness sign, an eye-catching blue canvas with white letters that reads: Guide Dog - Guiding Eyes for the Blind, can be attached to a leather harness with straps/clips that wrap around the handle. The sign has a zipper compartment, large enough to store a few poop bags, a small beacon light, clicker and gentle leader/halti if wrapped up tightly.

There is also a smaller, zippered pouch that will securely fasten to the handle or body of the leather harness, or the Ruffwear Unifly handle.

Q and A session

Q. How do I know if the Unifly harness I have is the most up-to-date version?

A. The newest model has different hardware. Miranda instructed the graduate tocall her to discuss whether he needs a replacement.

Q. I have been asked why my dog does not wear an identifiable service animal vest

A. The leather harness has the name of our school embossed on it. Thisis just as good as a vest. Miranda assured the graduate that Melissa Carney could assist if the business misunderstood the laws pertaining to service dogs. The Guiding Eyes leather stamped harness is the passport in terms of access.

Q. Can you explain the purpose of the allen wrench that comes with the Unifly harness?

A. The allen wrench is used for tightening the cleat to the harness body and the bracket on the handle. Earlier models might require a little upkeep - checking the fasteners regularly. Contact Miranda if you need to replace the allen wrench.

Q. What is an ID cane?

A. This is a short, slender folding cane. Unfolded, it looks like a pointer, useful for locating or scouting out the immediate surrounding area, i.e., locating a pole for an intersection, a gap on a sidewalk/road, or a doorway. An ID cane is a useful tool when teaching our dog to target. Miranda added, make sure when working your dog that you do not use a cane; it may confuse the guide dog.

Miranda concluded her presentation with a few additional thoughts:

1. If you have a leather harness with the panic or O ring, contact Miranda or your RGDMI to discuss replacing it.
2. The Unifly harness is not limited to handlers that run with their dog. All students, home trained or class trained, will have the option of choosing a leather harness or the Unifly, available in three colors; charcoal, high-visibility yellow, and orange/magpie blue.
3. Call the Guiding Eyes general number to purchase patches, signs or harness pouches.