GEB Graduate Quarterly Call, January 30, 2022 Recap

Topic: Meet Melissa Carney, Guiding Eyes Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager

Andrea Conner, Graduate Council President, welcomed everyone to the call and introduced Melissa Carney, Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager. Andrea thanked Melissa for agreeing to be here and turned the microphone over to her.

Melissa stated how much she has been looking forward to speaking to the graduate community and expressed what an honor it has been to be welcomed into the Guiding Eyes community. Melissa has been a Guiding Eyes graduate for 5 ½ years and started work at the school in her current position in December 2021.

At the age of two years, Melissa was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, a type of eye cancer that caused her blindness. She grew up in a small, rural town in Connecticut with no sidewalks, public transportation or other people with disabilities. She had a very interesting childhood, trying to figure out a lot of things on her own not having mentors and community opportunities. It wasn't until high school that she began to embrace her disability and started to use a cane more regularly. She pushed herself out of her comfort zone, gaining greater independence. She learned that in order to succeed, she had to embrace many aspects of her blindness. She met other blind people (and people with different disabilities) and was impressed and amazed at what they could do. These people quickly became her mentors. Melissa felt empowered by these people and by the community she found in other blind individuals. It was through that community and mentorship that she started to understand her own aspirations and potential. She said she truly felt like she was growing as a person. She realized that there were things such as accommodations, equal rights and the ADA that enabled her to become more confident and live her life to the fullest.

Melissa stated, “when I got to college, I had the opportunity to give back and mentorothers as a peer mentor for Mount Holyoke College Accessibility Services.” She helped students with disabilities, many who did not have any role models, transition to college. She helped them become comfortable speaking and advocating with professors, joining extracurriculars – and walked them through what it was like to familiarize others with their needs and their rights. Melissa explained that she was still learning and that she continues to learn. During her freshman year, Melissa went from a person who had no cane skills, except for indoor travel, to someone who had to travel on her own outdoors. She applied for a guide dog, soon being matched with a male yellow Labrador named Aron. She felt like her horizons opened up even further. She met new community members -- people who had gone through hardships, and then their guide dogs helped them find their stride again. Following graduation with Aron, Melissa felt she was able to start putting herself out there to travel more, take more risks, and look for additional opportunities and challenges.

Melissa lived in DC where she interned at the National Council on Independent Living and later in Boston where she interned for IBM's accessibility team. She has traveled everywhere from Florida to Philadelphia to Las Vegas and beyond. Melissa stated that having a guide dog has encouraged her to step out of her comfort zone and led her to be honest about what she wanted for herself, her career and her goals. She explained that she’s become passionate in disability advocacy and justice through her experiences and decided to take that passion a step further. After her internships and her dual degree in English and Psychology, Melissa started looking for ways where she could really change the lives of other blind people. She wanted to find ways in which she could truly empathize with people and share the joy of connecting those who share similar situations, unified struggles, successes, experiences, trials and errors.

Melissa became the Director of Outreach and Engagement for the Pennsylvania Council of the Blind in 2020, at the onset of the pandemic. This initially presented some challenges for her - moving to a new area and adapting to living in an apartment where she was essentially isolated. In this position, she was able to mentor others and provide resources. That motivated her. Many people who recently lost their sight were severely impacted by the digital divide because they could not receive the in-person, hands**-**on assistive technology training they needed. They were also coping with the emotional adjustment to blindness alone and were isolated. Melissa explained how these scenarios taught her a lot about the different struggles, life transitions and stages that blind people endure. She feels this made her a more rounded, aware, and appreciative person. Melissa described how the pandemic forced many of us to adapt and figure out next steps, how to move forward and champion the challenges in our paths despite countless hurdles. We made it through the pandemic thanks to our support systems and people who were willing to lend a helping hand.

Melissa saw a job posting at Guiding Eyes and thought it would be a wonderful opportunity. She accepted the position, Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager and now lives near the Guiding Eyes campus. Melissa is grateful to be able to listen to graduates’ concerns, answer questions, and present our needs to Guiding Eyes. She added that it is the graduates who give her purpose in her work.

She further explained that her job revolves around representing the needs of graduates. This would include checking that anything released by GEB is accessible and user-friendly, keeping our graduates up-to-date on new initiatives, and making sure that graduates’ voices are heard related to new processes. She wants to support our graduates wherever possible from both an individual and community standpoint. Melissa stated that learning the needs and the experiences of the graduates, in addition to learning from people who have been around longer than she has, is what she thinks is crucial in best informing her decision-making and learning how to best support the graduate community. Melissa would like to create additional resources for graduates - whether this would include a refresher lecture on advocacy, updates on key legislation that could impact guide dog teams, or something else. She wants to ensure that graduates are creating more meaningful and dynamic connections with Guiding Eyes, as well as other community members. Melissa said her focus is in looking at how Guiding Eyes can think about increasing communication and making it more efficient. She wants to ensure that everyone feels they have the space to be involved and feels free to tell her what they need. She continued that graduates should reach out with any ideas or suggestions. She added that possible projects that could benefit our community include a mentorship program and reviving the newsletter.

Melissa added, “I would like to raise awareness of guide dogs and blindness to the public and to the staff, making sure that everyone is aware of our rights, how to treat us, and what our experiences in society have been. I want to ensure the positive reputation and mission of Guiding Eyes. We all love our school but we can always make it a better place. Working at Guiding Eyes has not only given me a chance to give back and serve our community, but a chance for personal growth as well.”

Melissa provided her contact information: email address mcarney@guidingeyes.org and phone 845-519-8419. She is usually available between nine and five on weekdays, but if there is an emergency, graduates can feel free to contact her after hours or on weekends.

Melissa gave the following updates to frequently-asked questions from the graduate community.

The average wait time for home training applicants is about two years from date of acceptance and about 13 months for residential training. For some people the wait time might be longer based on factors such as pace and environment. Melissa stated that Guiding Eyes is still playing catch up from COVID. Delays took place in both training and placement during the pandemic. Eighty-seven teams graduated in the last nine months of 2020 and 104 teams graduated in 2021. Prior to COVID, GEB typically placed between 150 and 160 teams per year.

There are currently 185 people approved and waiting to receive a guide dog. The breakdown by program is: 99 people for the general class program, 63 people for home training, and 23 people for the Specialized Training Program. Lauren left the Guiding Eyes Admissions staff and Liz recently came on board. The Admissions Department has been reaching out to applicants on the waiting list to see if they are still interested in receiving a dog and to give them an estimate on the timeframe.

Q and A session

Q. How many Running Guides have graduated in the last six months and is anything happening with the Running Guides Program?

A. I do not have the answer for the first question. The Running Guides Program is another area where we have experienced a few staffing changes. Right now, Jolene Hollister is in charge of the Running Guides Program. We are continuing to look at the quality of the match when evaluating the need for a Running Guide. They are still being trained. The wait time to get a running dog at this point is longer than that of the general residential program because there are only a certain number of dogs that have the desire to run.

Q. Are you working remotely or are you on campus?

A. I am lucky enough to work on campus.; it is such a positive environment. As a graduate, it was so nice to see many familiar faces and meet new ones. It is wonderful working in a place where everyone shares the same ambition.

Q. Are all graduates of the Specialized Training Program home-trained or do any of the students who need specially trained dogs come to train at the school?

A. It is a mix. Many people go through the Specialized Training Program and receive home training because it's an environment that they're more comfortable in or it better suits their schedule. There are some people, however, who go into residential class for the experience of being on campus and meeting other students. It really comes down to preference and needs.

Q. Have they added instructors to the Specialized Training Program?

A. As it stands right now, the instructors in the Specialized Training Program are Andrea Martine, Susan Kroha and Ellin Purcell.

Q. The wait time is about 12 to 13 months. In the past it's been closer to 6 or 7 months. Do you have any ideas about how, over time, you might be able to shorten that waiting period?

A. Yes, there are definitely plans being implemented as we speak as to how we can shorten that wait time. We will keep you updated throughout the process, as we can. You’ll start to notice changes going down the road. For anyone who's not familiar, we now have two-week class formats with follow-up support as needed. That's an adjustment; class sizes are a lot smaller. We’re typically seeing about four to six students come into class at a time.

Q. How do you envision a mentoring program will work?

A. I would love for applicants to have a mentor from acceptance at Guiding Eyes through as long as they would like. Once an applicant is accepted, he or she would be matched with a mentor who has a similar background, story or lifestyle. The mentor, a graduate, would share certain life experiences with the applicant that would benefit their knowledge and confidence to work with and care for a guide dog. If the mentee is on the wait list, the mentor would encourage them and help them learn any remaining skills they might need before training with a dog. The mentor would then support them in class and make sure they have as positive of an experience as possible and a smooth transition home. Mentorship should last as long as it is needed. If there are returning graduates who decide they need a mentor, there's nothing wrong with that either. I think it should be both new and returning graduates who are welcomed into the mentorship program, in alignment with the idea of community and making sure that everyone feels they have a fellow advocate to turn to.

Q. I know what it is like to do these graduate calls. They are hard to do, and you did such a great job. What tools were you using, are you using technology so that you wouldn't forget what you wanted to talk about?

A. I think I’m terrible at reading speeches, in sounding authentic and coming across the way I would like to. I have become comfortable talking off the cuff. The one cheat sheet I have is a little braille display. I had a couple notes for myself just to make sure I didn't forget anything because I think we all get nervous especially when we're revealing ourselves in such a big way. I don't like reading a script. I like presenting myself for who I am and being raw and open with you all. I hope to do that as much as I can in the future.

Q. I think if that is an example of how you present yourself, we will be well represented by you. My last question is, you talked a couple times about community, and how that is really important to you. What is it about the Guiding Eyes community that stands out for you?

A. We all may have different reasons for getting a guide dog, but we share in the joy of companionship, trust, and a partner to explore whatever life throws at us. We are unified in our life-changing bonds and independence.

Comment: “I was just going to say hello but I want to share a story. While I was in class receiving my dog, another student was excited that they came to Guiding Eyes and I asked them why they chose Guiding Eyes. The student said the school was the friendliest they had interviewed with. I fully support that we keep that. I hope we don't lose that friendly feeling and become a stuff shirt that nobody wants to come to anymore.”

Response from Melissa: “I completely agree. A lot of us are touched by the family aspect of Guiding Eyes when we walk into the dining hall and they ask what we want to eat, joke with us, ask about how training is going, all while you're struggling to prevent your dogs from pulling you towards your instructor. There are so many challenges and successes that we experience together. When I was in training, my dog developed an abscess on his paw. I was discouraged and worried that I'd fall behind in training. I was worried about my dog because he was already so attached to his instructor and I was scared that we would lose time and bonding at the school. It was because of my Guiding Eyes family, the instructors, and my fellow classmates who were there for their second or third dogs, who encouraged me. They made sure that I didn't feel as though I was left behind. That's the great thing about Guiding Eyes, you don't feel like you're lost. There may be times when you struggle, but it's temporary. You always have someone to lift you up and make sure that you feel valued.”

Q. Melissa, I want to tell you how inspired I feel by your introduction, as well as the love and determination and the genuineness you have for us, our dogs and for the school. My question for you is, do you know if the wait times differ for those who want a Shepherd? The follow up to that question is, are they putting out as many Shepherds as they used to or are they putting out more Labs?

A. I'm glad that love and need to support my community is coming out loud and clear. That was definitely my intention and thank you for validating that. To answer your question, the wait time is a bit longer, as it has been in the past for a Shepherd versus a Lab because there are fewer Shepherds than Labs. There’s a very particular lifestyle that fits the needs of a Shepherd as any Shepherd handler knows. As to your second question, I'm not sure how many Shepherds are being put out as compared to what was pre-pandemic, but I can definitely find that out for you.

Q. I am actually in the application process right now. I am waiting on a home interview which is exciting. What kind of role does Guiding Eyes take with graduates who have experienced access discrimination issues because of their dogs?

A. If you have any access issues, please contact me. Not only have I been through them myself, so I can talk to you from a personal perspective, but I can also share important resources with you. I have already helped several graduates with things like housing discrimination, Lyft denials, and other things that many of us are familiar with. If you ever have any access issues and don't know how to proceed, please feel free to contact me. A lot of those issues, and anything to do with advocacy, is covered in class during the advocacy lecture. If you are going through home training and you're not at the school, I'm working to make sure you have the opportunity to receive the same information. Traditionally, the advocacy lecture has only been for residential students but I think virtual options have opened a lot of doors. I look forward to making sure that regardless of program everyone is receiving that guidance going forward.

Q. If someone gets the call about having a potential match for them, is it typical that the training staff has found only one dog? I've had it happen where I was called into class by a different school and only one dog was chosen. I was not super comfortable with that dog. If I had said no to that dog I would have gone home without a dog.

A. That is a great question and it's definitely a valid concern. That is frustrating. Because of the pandemic, and because COVID itself only impacts the humans, we have a pretty significant dog pool and a lot of dogs that are ready to go out. Typically, when you do come into class you have the dog that most instructors are confident is the dog for you. They will have that dog picked out above all others and will always be prepared with a backup. We just had a situation in a recent class where the pace was a little off. The handler said they might be able to cope with it. She and the instructor had an honest conversation and decided that another dog would be best. One of the great aspects of Guiding Eyes is you have the ability to be transparent and say whether you feel comfortable with the dog; the dog that feels right for you. You don’t want to get home only to realize that it isn't working out and have to go back to class to get another dog.

Q. Do you think Guiding Eyes is going to bring back the newsletter?

A. A lot goes into the newsletter. Unfortunately, it is not completely up to me. I don't want to give an exact deadline. Ideally, I would like to get an issue out by fall. I would like to see a newsletter come out regularly again.

Q. How long from the time an application for the training program is accepted is the wait to get a dog?

A. Right now, the wait time is 2 years for home training and 13 months for residential training. Again, that is all dependent on a variety of factors – such as breed preference, color preference, if you need a city-sound dog - it's dependent on many factors.

Q. What would happen in a home training situation, if the dog were brought to me and the trainer and I discussed things and we decided that it wasn't the right dog for me?

A. It’s the same process; they always have another dog in mind. However, they are usually very confident with the match because there have been so many resources invested in putting the match together and making sure the dog is getting to you. In my time here, I haven't seen any dogs returned from a match with a home training student. You will have many transparent conversations with your instructor about how things are going. If the match wasn’t appropriate, the dog would be returned and the home training would be rescheduled. It may look a little more complicated on paper trying to fly the dog back, getting a new dog and rescheduling the home training but that is what would happen. There is always another option; we are not just going to say, “We can’t serve you, go on your way.” The main goal is that both you and the dog are comfortable.

Andrea: Thank you Melissa, and everyone else, for taking time this evening to spend it together. It has been nice getting to know Melissa and I’m sure she has enjoyed the opportunity to get to know you too. The conversations and the work that I've done with Melissa these past couple months has been remarkable. I feel like she's not a staff member - she's just one of us. Melissa, that's exactly how you come across, thank you for that. We'll do roll call, then end the meeting.