GEB Graduate Quarterly Call, October 24, 2021 Recap

Topic: Updates from Thomas Panek, President and CEO, Guiding Eyes for the Blind

Andrea Conner welcomed everyone and thanked Thomas Panek for joining us.

The following Council Members were in attendance and introduced themselves:

Andrea Conner, Interim President

Cindy LaBon, Corresponding Secretary

Deborah Groeber

Jywanza Maye

Chloe Ortiz

Becky Davidson and Annie Chiappetta, recently added to Graduate Council, were not available for the call.

Thomas began his presentation, breaking it down into three parts.

Part 1

Thomas said the school is doing well, but things have not been without their challenges. Guiding Eyes has not only had to deal with COVID and the pandemic, but also a bout of kennel cough. Guiding Eyes is finally in a position where it can invest in some much-needed repairs and buildings.

Thomas addressed 3 capital projects

The initial project is the opening of a Visitor’s Center in Yorktown Heights on Commerce Street**,** a couple miles from the school. It will have a large open space with a comfortable seating area with couches and chairs on one side and a large gift shop on the other. Staff member, Dell Rodman coordinated the work necessary to decorate the walls of the Center. Framed photographs highlight the history of Guiding Eyes. These photos will be audio described.

The Center is 100% wheelchair accessible. One is able to get right off a bus or van and go right in. Everything in the facility was made with universal design in mind, including the kitchen and bathroom.

The Center will be used for three purposes:

1) for puppy classes in the region

2) for training teams to get out of the weather elements when they're training downtown, grab a cup of coffee or use the restroom

3) as a place other than White Plains for students to train when coming to campus

The second project involves the sale of the White Plains lounge and the purchase of a similar facility in the White Plains area.

The third major project is a new kennel. The recent storm, Hurricane Ida, flooded the community run and damaged the ceiling and skylights. It's been a struggle to keep the kennel dry and it's at the end of its useful life.

Our long-term strategic goal is to have a nearby kennel to house about 150 dogs off-site and still maintain the kennel operation in Yorktown Heights for about 50 dogs.

those who are familiar with the home foster program know, one of the things that Guiding Eyes understands intimately is that dogs don't really want to be in a kennel. Some dogs adapt well to the kennel environment, but others get pretty stressed. Because it is necessary to have our dogs at our disposal during the training process, and because of the fostering that started during the pandemic, the maintenance garage has been converted into a building to help the pick-up and dropping off of dogs being home fostered. It’s now called the Carriage House. Guiding Eyes Board Chair, John Donnelly and his wife Nancy, donated money in memory of John's mom, Velma. The Carriage House offers an opportunity for the community to drop off and pick up dogs at the campus for their training during the daytime and gets class-ready dogs out of the kennel.

Also, the renovation of 4 dorm rooms in alumni hall has begun.

Part 2

The second part of Thomas’ presentation addressed what’s going on with dogs and classes.

Thomas stated that the school had a bout of kennel cough - about as bad as its seen in 24 years. All the dogs are recovering and they're doing okay. In terms of the future, he said they’re going to have to continue to adapt and adjust to the pandemic by really keeping the instructor to student ratio very low. Like many organizations, GEB has 2 students per instructor and has run residential class on a 2-week basis. Guiding Eyes also provides immediate follow-up services to its students - which is really the pride and joy of the school. It's something the school continues to spend resources on because it's important.

Guiding Eyes has a fair number of puppies being born every year. Last year it was 361. The school graduated 103 guide dog teams; the goal for last year was 125. A goal exists because the school tries to match as many guide dogs with graduates as it can. GEB looks at ways that it can improve that goal, but makes sure the quality of the dogs is not compromised even though a goal is in mind. Guiding Eyes would like to reduce the number of people that are waiting for a guide dog. Thomas said that reducing the wait time for a dog is one of the main goals he’s had since arriving at the school. GEB currently has 191 applicants that have been approved by Jessy DiNapoli and her team. GEB is trying to really move through that list as expeditiously as possible while at the same time making sure that it gives every single student and dog the individual attention they deserve. As everyone knows, it‘s a balance.

Guiding Eyes wants to make sure that it’s serving its returning graduates - that its continuing to be able to provide dogs to those individuals who might need a replacement guide dog because of a particular dog not working out, or maybe a health issue or retirement of their dog. Serving its graduates continues to be a commitment of the school. However, it's been a struggle given everything that's going on in the marketplace.

Looking forward at strategic goals, Guiding Eyes has been working on some pretty dynamic plans for the next 3 to 5 years – so called post-COVID plans. What Guiding Eyes has been able to do phenomenally well since the campus reopened after being closed in March 2020, is to have 47 in-home trainings take place -- almost an equal number to the 48 residential trainings. That is a 50-50 breakdown. The school would like to continue to be able to serve more people in their home environment

Part 3

The third area Thomas talked about was related to the German Shepherds and GEB’s breeding colony.

There's been a long waiting list for German Shepherds. Thomas explained, during one of his first meetings at Guiding Eyes, someone said let’s not have German Shepherds anymore. He replied, “that's a pretty bold decision, let's give it 2 years and see how it goes.” Thomas continued, “I can tell you right now -- as long as I'm President, we're going to have German Shepherds.” The challenge Guiding Eyes has is in getting good estimated breeding values -- something that the school has used to rate the dogs -- and discover which dogs are going to breed and continue to build a colony.” For those of you who are familiar with GEB’s breeding practices you know that Guiding Eyes goes outside to other guide dog schools, as well as other organizations around the world, to get breeding stock, and also to provide breeding stock. Guiding Eyes has some trainers that are deeply passionate about training German Shepherds including Jolene Hollister, who is called the shepherd whisperer, by some. Thomas said he is touched by the shepherds the school has and he wishes that Guiding Eyes had more of them. Thomas reiterated the school’s commitment to increasing the breeding colony and said that so far, Guiding eyes is doing really well in this regard.

Q and A section

Q. A graduate asked about an organization that went by the acronym BDO that was at Guiding Eyes, observing the August 2nd class. They asked if Thomas could share what BDO’s findings and recommendations were.

A. Thomas explained that BDO is the company that does GEB’s financial audits; Thomas stated that GEB will get recommendations somewhere between November 1st and the 8th and that one of the recommendations that BDO made with regards to the Development Team is that Guiding Eyes has one donor database.

Q. A graduate stated that when she was in class one of the students in her class had a dog that ultimately did not work out. She was wondering whether people who had dogs that did not work out, receive priority in getting another dog, what management can do to help reduce the chances of a match not working and how a match that fails is factored into the overall success rate.

A. Thomas responded that he understands how frustrating it is when things don't work out and how challenging it can be when the student, the trainers and everyone else has put in the time and effort and things still don’t work out. He said that the only thing that matters is that Guiding Eyes finds the right dog for each student. GEB has people who are deeply committed to making that happen. Thomas continued to explain that when a guide dog doesn't work out, it can be because of so many different variables.

The success rate, Thomas explained, is measured very carefully and tends to be about the same year to year; it has not gone down in the past year or so. Thomas defined the success rate as placing a dog with a student and then that dog remaining with the student for at least two years, and stated that's how the Council of US Guide Dog Schools measures success.

Thomas spoke about a mentorship program being developed which would give incoming students support.

Chloe spoke, mentioning the follow-up services and the importance of these services to graduates, describing her own experiences in receiving a visit from a GDMI to help her and her new dog acclimate to a new environment.

Q. A Graduate Council member asked if the post-covid small classes would remain or would classes be expanded.

A. Thomas reiterated the school’s commitment to the two-week classes. He mentioned the small classes are a great option for people. For someone who's returning for a dog that feels confident after the 2 weeks, doing that 3rd week follow-up once they've gotten settled at home is nice. It's a really great option to have, in fact, for some new guide dog users, or for some returning guide dog users, it might be the best option. Being on campus with a Guide Dog Mobility Instructor following each student around might wonderful, but as soon as the students go home and are in their own home environment that's when they really learn a lot about their dog.

Q. A graduate asked, given that she was pretty sure that Guiding Eyes vaccinates all its dogs against kennel cough, how did so many of the school’s dogs get kennel cough?

A. Another graduate said that dogs can get kennel cough even if they are vaccinated, just like a virus that gets past a flu vaccine: It is just usually less severe.

Q. A graduate asked if GEB will ever bring back Golden Retrievers.

A. Thomas responded that he loves the retriever line and that it would be wonderful to think about bringing the retriever line back. He said that he heard of other schools having cross-breeds, GEB just doesn’t see the same success rate from them. He said that in talking with Kathy Zubrycki, he learned that while GEB had some wonderful retrievers, it also had some challenges continuing the line. Guiding Eyes works hard to make sure its Labrador population, and now its Shepherd population, is as good as it can be. Thomas said he would love to bring in another breed, but it's resource intensive. He said the school would need to see some real success with the breed before it would really make that kind of commitment.

Q. A Graduate Council member asked, since it looks like Guiding Eyes will be conducting a higher percent of home trainings going forward, does the Guiding Eyes Board and school think that they have an adequate number of GDMIs to support both the students in training and the existing graduates and if not, has Guiding Eyes had any success in obtaining additional people to be part of the training staff?

A. Thomas replied that Guiding Eyes does not have enough GDMIs. It takes 3 years of apprenticeship and that's just to get a person as a qualified instructor. It takes years and years to build the experience and to know how to really make a difference in providing a person with a dog that's exceptionally well-trained. Guiding Eyes recently hired 2 GDMIs. The school had interviewed about 15 final candidates and narrowed that down to 2. There is a third person that joined GEB as a Learning and Development Specialist. Danielle Cuénoud used to be a teacher of the visually impaired. There are another 5 GDMIs that the school is going to be recruiting in the next year, so it's something that we're definitely committed to doing. Not only does GEB need to hire Guide Dog Mobility Instructors for home training, but it also has people that are either nearing retirement or taking less hours because they're starting a family. Guiding Eyes needs to continue to hire Guide Dog Mobility Instructors and it's one of those things where GEB encourages everyone to help spread the word. This is not a unique problem to GEB. Thomas stated that when he talked to other CEOs of guide dog schools, they were all desperately seeking talent in guide dog mobility instructors. He said he thinks it is incumbent on us all as a graduate community to talk to people about how important this role is.

Q. The same Graduate Council member asked whether the school has lost any dogs due to kennel cough and/or whether it’s had to retire or release dogs due to kennel cough?

A. Thomas said he’s not aware of any dogs that have been lost. He continued that there has been a delay in the dogs’ training, and some of the dogs have needed skill refreshers because they have spent time getting well and haven't been out and about training… or if they completed their training, they need to go back and get some refresher training.

Q. A graduate asked about keeping the family feel to our school. She worries that growing and expanding might mean losing the family connections with the school she loves.

A. Thomas spoke of the impact the pandemic has had on everyone - as individuals and collectively. He talked about the difficulty seeing people face-to-face. The school still has great people welcoming students to campus. He said Guiding Eyes needs to continue to grow to meet the increased demand for guide dogs. Thomas discussed that more people need a guide dog - the tough part is how does the school grow while maintaining the family feel.

Thomas said he’s heard from a couple of people that GEB is losing its family feel as it grows - and his answer to that is actually, it’s up to us -- it’s up to the Graduate Council -- it’s up to everybody to change that and to welcome people. Thomas said he would also love to see a mentor program.

He said he’s heard about it over the years but hasn't really seen it happen. He said maybe he just doesn't know about it, but it would be nice to be able to say one of the ways one feels like family is when someone else calls them and welcomes them from the graduate community as soon as they know that they’re coming into class and then follows up with them like how they do with the exit surveys. Thomas explained how tough it is to keep that family feel when the school can't have a big class and can't have graduations.

The graduate replied that a program like that would be a good idea, especially if the person calling was from the graduate’s area. She said that from the first day when she stepped into Guiding Eyes, to this very day, it feels like home away from home. She wants it to stay that way.

Q. A graduate Council member asked about the RV that was purchased early in the pandemic.

A. Thomas explained that Guiding Eyes sold the RV. He said that as much as the school enjoyed it, once everyone was able to get back on airplanes it didn’t make sense to keep it. GEB had it for about a year and thank goodness the school had it because it was the only way it could have moved those dogs out west at that time. It even made it into People magazine with those puppies!

Q. A graduate asked about graduate connections, whether everyone will be able to get together for another retreat, whether it's virtual or not and how will graduates stay connected.

A. Thomas said he loved what was done with the continuing education event at Doral Arrowood and stated “it was a really special thing.” Thomas goes on to say, because things today are so unpredictable, he wants to wait a bit longer before committing to another continuing education seminar like the first one.

There being no more questions, Andrea thanked all graduates and Thomas for a wonderful presentation.

The call wrapped up with a graduate roll call.