Graduate Quarterly Call, January 29, 2023 Recap

Topic: Where the Guide Dog Journey Begins - With the Harness in Hand

Panelists include Grad Council Members Becky Davidson-Vice President, Pat Leahy-Corresponding Secretary, Tina Reisner and Annie Chiappetta, as well as Puppy Raisers Brian Payne, Val Hazlin, Karen Best and Gayle Papesh.

Brian Payne is from Massachusetts East Region and is currently raising his 6th guide dog for Guiding Eyes. He has had 4 Labs and 2 German Shepherds – 3 dogs have graduated and his current dog is in harness training.

Val Hazlin, Connecticut East Region, began raising puppies in 2002 and is currently on dog number 18.

Karen Best is a Raiser in the Columbus West Region. She has raised 6 pups with 2 having graduated. The dog she is currently raising will be returning to Guiding Eyes in the near future.

Gayle Papesh is from the Cleveland West Region, and is currently raising her 8th pup; all seven of her previous puppies have graduated.

Pre-submitted questions from puppy raisers to graduates

Q. What do you wish your guide dog could have been better taught and how could the dog have been better prepared for any specific tasks?

Tina: After having 2 dogs, I believe off leash recall is important.

Annie: I agree with Tina. Additionally, I think good house behavior is important – as is exposure to other animals.

Pat: Raisers do a great job and thank you for all your work. There is the work side of the dog and the dog’s need to fetch and have fun. Discipline and house manners are very important.

Q. Are working guide dogs allowed to play with other dogs outside your own household, for example, a neighbor with a friendly dog?

Becky: Yes, if in a controlled environment that the handler is used to.

Annie: I have a pet dog at home and they do play a lot; I do not go to dog parks. As Becky said, we have to be aware, from the perspective of safety who they interact with. We don’t want any negative reactions with other dogs whether in or out of harness.

Tina: Use caution. Make sure the dogs are good together first. Because we cannot see, we need to be prepared for what may or may not come. It can get aggressive quickly. The dogs have emotions and feelings that we may not be able to pick up on until a fight has already started.

Pat: I agree with my fellow grads. Quick answer, dogs do need time with other dogs. I always screen well as a protective dad and make sure the dog we are going to hang out with isn’t nipping or causing trouble. I rarely let him loose with several dogs. I need to know the dogs and their temperament. Dogs do love to let their hair down.

Becky comment: It is fun for us to observe even if we can’t visually see them and to hear the joyous barking and all of that!

Pre-submitted questions from graduates to puppy raisers

Q. A previous Puppy Raiser was not interested in keeping in contact. In general, do Raisers want contact with graduates and their new dog and why?

Gayle: I must admit that I’m quite a stalker when it comes to my graduates. When they graduate, I will give them all my information. I love to hear how the pups are doing. I love to send them gifts. Many of my raiser friends don’t get the same opportunities that I have had with my graduates, and they are a little bit sad about it. To be quite honest, they would really appreciate yearly updates like, how the pups are getting along, are they working out, places they are going, etc. Receiving a picture is like gold!

Brian: I would agree with that - the more information, the better. You cannot tell us enough about the puppies that you have, how well they are doing or even if you are having problems. I’ve gotten some questions from my graduates, like how I dealt with this or that. It has been nice to continue along those lines. I had three puppies graduate, but only one graduate has really kept in touch. I don’t hear much from the other two. If that is something that you do not want to do, I respect that, but, from my perspective, I love to hear from you. A raiser friend of mine received a Father’s Day card every year. I thought that was such a beautiful idea. A Mother’s Day card would be nice too.

Karen: We want contact with the graduates 100%. As Brian said, even if it is just once a year. A Christmas card, the family Christmas card with the dog, updates on things that the puppy has done, birthday pictures, any of that – we love. I have been very fortunate; two out of my three graduates have kept in touch. I wish I had more information about the other one though.

Becky: Another thing that I found that seems to make it easier to stay in touch is being friends with your Raiser on Facebook. You already have that connection which makes it very easy to just pop something in there.

Karen: It is disappointing if we do not get a little bit of an update occasionally. We know people are different and some people are more closed and that is understandable.

Brian: I want to add one more thing - one of the graduates with one of my dogs is a young college student. I definitely respect it if they are not able to commit the time, I do understand.

Karen: We were wondering if there is a way graduates could give an update once a year to Guiding Eyes if they do not want to contact us personally. Guiding Eyes could then send that information along to the Puppy Raiser.

Becky: That is a good idea. What I found in the years that I was working at Guiding Eyes is that the people that did not stay in touch with the Puppy Raiser didn’t necessarily stay in touch with Guiding Eyes either, unless they absolutely needed something specific. There are people that get their dogs, go off on their own and get in touch with Guiding Eyes when they need to. One of the things that the Graduate Council does is to try to maintain contact with the graduate community. We will try to figure out a way to make that happen.

Questions from graduates to puppy raisers

Q. How did you get involved with raising puppies?

Karen: I have been in the Special Education profession for my whole career - I am a speech language pathologist. I retired, then did some part-time work. I said, I am going to be retiring for sure. What can I do as a volunteer that will make a huge impact on folks? I did not want to work in a nursing home. So, I came up with the idea of raising puppies - it has been very rewarding! There is a community of Raisers. We get together at the puppy classes and take the puppies to different places. It is a wonderful community of very selfless, dedicated people!

Brian: It started when I was in high school. We had to read a book called “If You Can See What I Hear.” It was the first book that I liked; it got me interested in the whole community. One day, as an adult, I saw someone walking a cute little baby black Lab. I introduced myself. The man told me about the program; a couple months later, I was raising a puppy! The community that we have as raisers kept me coming back. The puppies are cute, but it is really the community of raisers, the support that we give each other, that has really become an important part of my life.

Val: My husband read an article. Things finally fell into place. Because of our jobs, it took us about 15 years before we started raising puppies. I agree with Brian; the puppy raising community is like a family. We have a lot of repeat raisers in Eastern Connecticut, too.

Gayle: I would agree with all of that as well. My situation was like Karen’s. I was getting ready to retire and I did not know what to do with myself. One of my best friends read an article - requesting Puppy Raisers. I got my first puppy and have been going strong ever since! It is really a great community; you meet lovely people every time you’re out. I have been fortunate to have good relationships with my graduates which has enriched me as well. It’s a win, win!

Question from puppy raisers to graduates

Q. What experiences do you think are most important for Puppy Raisers to focus on?

Tina: Exposure is so important. We, as graduates, go to many places; we go on planes, trains, buses, and spend time with children. We have all kinds of occupations.I think the more that our dogs are involved in exploring the world around them while they are being raised, the better they will be as guide dogs and the better they will serve us after graduation.I remember my first dog; I got him when I was 18 years old; he was a cute adorable yellow Lab named Butch. We encountered a peacock in Chicago - I don’t think my dog had ever seen one. He reacted so well to that peacock freaking out at him - makes you wonder if he was exposed to other birds. The more that our dogs can be exposed to various environments, the better they are at guiding and problem-solving.

Pat: Here are a couple of thoughts regarding training those pups, I’d suggest mixing it up in different settings. If you can do busy coffee shops, restaurants and all the places that an active guide dog will be going, I think that’s great. The more the better. I will add one more thing on the last question from the Puppy Raisers on tips for graduates. I’d encourage you to write down a record of what makes that puppy tick. My raisers, Jean and Larry, were such great raisers. They responded to all my questions about Hogan’s favorite treat rewards. In Hogan’s case, it was a hot dog. So, the more you can remember about puppy times to help the graduate when they ask, the better. The dogs never forget. Whatever that fun motivation thing might be for the puppy - it often carries through into the guide dog years. So, keep mixing it up and have a fun time.

Tina: I want to comment on what Pat is saying. Our puppy raisers are instrumental in putting the puzzle pieces together. They start, piece by piece. We hone in, communicate and touch base with them (raisers), filling in the pieces as we get to know more about our dog. We love our Puppy Raisers; are very grateful for everything they do and they are definitely part of our community.

Annie: My first dog, Verona, was very well behaved around large animals. She was brought up on a horse ranch. No matter what kind of animal I exposed her to, she responded with - okay, whatever. When I started working with Bailey, we went to a horse ranch, he did not like the horses. He would bark at them. He was very intrigued, but I don’t think he was exposed to large animals. I had to do extra work with him to try to acclimate him. So, I was wondering if we switch back to the other end of the questioning - how do you expose the puppies to large animals in a safe place? I am curious about that. We can hold off until we switch back over.

Becky: It depends on what you have available to you. Raisers may not be in a situation/environment where they have that opportunity. During one of my Exit Surveys, the graduate said she lived on a farm. During training, they went to a farm somewhere near Guiding Eyes and exposed the dog to that environment. I think that is a really good idea. I was just going to mention what experiences are most important. We always go back to house manners and exposing the dog to situations, like finding a way to avoid the dogs scavenging in the house. Getting into stuff in the house, they’re going to, they are dogs. But for us, as blind people, we do not always know immediately what our dogs are up to. My husband and I are really strict about keeping our dogs out of the kitchen, partly because of what might be available to them, but more importantly, there is no possibility that they are going to get hurt by us while cooking. We do not intentionally throw knives or anything else, but a dog underfoot might trip you, causing an accident. Those are the kinds of things that came to my mind when I saw that question.

Annie: Let’s expand on that question about exposing the dogs to other animals and birds, for example. What do you guys typically do with your puppies; when do you start acclimating them to other animals other than what they already know (other dogs) and how does that work during their training with you?

Val: I am lucky to live about one hour away from the University of Connecticut. It is an agricultural school; they have pigs, sheep and horses. We often go up, walk around and have the dogs watch the animals. They cannot get through the fence, so everybody is safe. The reactions are quite comical. The first time the dogs see something, they would be like, whoa, what is that! We go back, repeat it again and the dogs say, oh okay, we saw that last week, I am okay with that. I am lucky there is a farm close by that has donkeys and chickens. A lot of neighbors have chickens too, so the puppies get to see a lot of animals, not only neighborhood cats and dogs.

Gayle: Some of us will take the dogs to County Fairs to see sheep, cows, horses and such as in the environment of a small farm. As the others have said, repeat exposure; No big deal after a while.

Brian: We have a raiser in our region that has some cows. We always try to do one training session a year there so that each dog will get some exposure to that. My two boys took horseback riding lessons and I would take the dogs with me to their lessons. We have a great picture of Armstrong kissing a horse. So, I do think they get decent exposure. We have raisers in our region that have multiple cats and dogs. In my household, we do not have any other pets, but we do have two little kids. We rotate the puppies, taking advantage of who has kids, dogs and cats. The rotated puppies spend two weeks at different places throughout their training, getting different home environment exposure.

Karen: I agree with everyone. We seek out opportunities: high school basketball games, farms, county fairs and bus excursions. We do as much as possible to expose them to various noises and situations.

Annie: I agree with the loud noises. Neither one of my dogs has ever had any problems with that.

Becky: My Golden Lab did, my other three dogs did not.

Gayle: When we notice that the dog is a little bit sensitive to noises, we do some training regiments that gradually introduce them to louder and different noises. I have to give our Regional Managers and Coordinators credit; we can email them with any questions we have. if we are not certain how to handle something, they are there to help us every step of the way.

Question from graduates to puppy raisers

Q. Have any of you had problems with your dog’s being motion sick or air sick? Were you able to take your puppy on a plane?

Brian: I know some Raisers have taken them on planes. I never had to deal with motion sickness until this week. The puppy I am raising right now, all of a sudden, got carsick. She is eight months old, so it is a little odd. I have talked with my Regional Coordinator/Manager and trainers at Guiding Eyes; we are working our way through it. Other than that, I have never had problems before now.

Gayle: I have not had a problem with motion sickness. We typically do not do any flying on planes, but we do expose the puppies. They go through TSA and sit on a stationary plane. We also take them on rapid transit, trains, buses and boats.

Val: I have had experiences with many, many dogs but none with airsickness or car sickness.

Question from puppy raisers to graduates

Q. How hard is it to adapt to your second guide dog?

Becky: when talking with other graduates, none of the transitions are easy. You have a relationship you built with the dog. When it has to change, it feels like a breakup, even though it is a little different than that. Personally, for me, the second one was the hardest. With your first guide dog, you do not really know anything except what people tell you. what you learn, what you experience and what you discover with your first dog is how much having a guide dog really changes your life. The attachment, for me, was ridiculously strong and hard to change. Your first guide dog is like your first love. You go on from there, but you never quite get over the first one. As hard as all the transitions are, that one is the hardest, because again, it is another thing that you don’t really know what to expect.

Annie: I still cry over Verona. She had my heart in so many distinct levels. Part of going from dog one to dog two is that the first time that you experienced this level and the increase of independence with your first guide dog; it is wonderful, it is exciting, it is life-changing, it is overwhelming. Sometimes, it takes time to get over those feelings - the wonder of it all. Pausing, and saying to yourself, intellectually, I know my dog had to retire. You take all of those emotions, feelings, the investment and put it into another dog. I don’t know about anybody else that is here tonight, but I felt like I would not be able to do it; didn’t know if I was up for a new dog. Thankfully, everybody else believed in me. I had such wonderful support; everyone at Guiding Eyes, all of my friends who are handlers and raisers, knew that I could do it. Bailey turned out to be an excellent dog. When I was training with him, I would forget his name. It was a momentary lapse; recognizing that this was part of the transition. We are resilient – our dogs know we are too. I think this level of canine acceptance and trust is such a big part of why we are successful.

Pat: The transition from my first dog to my second dog was the hardest. My first dog, Nina, a chocolate Lab was quite an energetic college dog. My second dog, Pepe, was a black Lab. I did Home Training with Pepe, and was lucky enough to train with a gentleman named Geoff Locke. Without Geoff, I would never have made it through training. The bottom line, I was comparing Nina, who did her absolute best, with Pepe, who I did not know yet. It is human nature. I compared the best of my first dog to the lowest level of my new dog. After a couple of months Geoff had me cruising with Pepe and I never looked back. It is always a tough transition, going from one guide dog to the next. I would like to give a shout out to all the Puppy Raisers - thank you for being there for us, in many cases, adopting the dog. There’s absolutely nothing better than knowing that your retired dog is in good hands!

Becky: It is a perfect circle when it works out like that.

Tina: I got my first dog when I was 18. It opened a lot of doors – a great sense of freedom. That dog was the most hyper yellow Lab, I swear, the yellow Labs are very mischievous. It was me and Butch. I was young and in college; he was part of my resiliency, part of how I got through college. Transitioning to the next dog was a kind of breakup. I like to relate to it as a new beginning - you experience mixed feelings, the new dog is just as nervous, excited and as ready for the unknown as you are. Taking that next step together is healing in so many ways. Also, you will never forget your first dog, it’s not like any other.

Question from graduates to puppy raisers

Q. How is the transition from one puppy to the next puppy?

Val: I can answer that. It is hard to give your puppy up. We usually get a new puppy about a month before the dog goes back. We then have a little puppy to come home to.

Brian: I usually have an overlap, or, a short window between the two dogs. It is definitely tough; we only have them for 18 months or so. I can only imagine the emotional heartache you all go through, having a partner that you rely on so much for so many years - it must be so much harder for you. We also have the first love issue. The first puppy that I raised was Adler. I will never forget him; he was really something else. I tried to move on to the next puppy as quickly as possible.

Karen: I do a lot of puppy sitting between raising my puppies. Puppy sitting is really needed in our region. There are always things that come up; (e.g., you are going to a wedding in Jamaica or you have a big weekend coming up). My husband and I calculated that we have puppy sat over 60 dogs. Some days, one puppy is leaving and the next one is coming. That is how I get my puppy kicks, as I call it. You cannot be in your house without a Guiding Eyes puppy for very long!

Gayle: I echo some of the previous comments. Yes, it is like a breakup; you have been with the dog 24/7 for over a year, and during COVID, closer to two years. When people mention I will have to give them up, I say, there are a lot of tears and some margaritas. I then keep the cycle going with a new puppy.

Brian: We have a saying in our region when we hand over a puppy and you are feeling very emotional; ‘you may want the dog, but somebody else needs it’. This reminds us of why and what we are doing.

Becky: Thank you for that. We always told Puppy Raisers, when bringing in the dog for training, that this is like sending your kid off to college to start their career. Some of the Raisers have said that they do think of things that way.

Karen: That is exactly true. You have to remember that you only have that puppy for a certain amount of time. It goes to college, graduate studies, then has a career. Guiding Eyes lets them choose their career, which I think is very important.

Val: When somebody says, that it’s a beautiful dog, my husband and I respond, well, it is not our dog. This helps a little bit.

Karen: I want to give credit to Guiding Eyes for letting us meet the graduates. We know there are some parts of it that we don’t know. As Brian says, it puts it in to perspective. When you see the new person with the dog that you raised, see their connection and how much that dog means to them, it is very touching.

Annie: We are all here because of the dogs. I appreciate everything you guys share; it is heartwarming to hear what all of you have to say.

Q & A session opened up to all Zoom attendees

Comment: When I got my Shepherd, almost 3 years ago, I contacted the regional puppy raiser person, asking if the puppy raisers would be interested in filling out a form that would give the graduates more indication of the dog’s personality and their experiences. You guys have touched upon how you would like to hear more questions from the graduates about your puppies.

Q. Brian said he has raised both Labs and Shepherds - which one did you find easier? I have had both.

Brian: I am just into my second Shepherd now, a female 8-month-old. My first Shepherd was during the COVID era, so, I had her two years. I have had four Labs. No doubt about it, Labs are easier. They are more food motivated. They are willing to do repeat exercises over and over again as long as you keep feeding them. The Shepherds have an attitude – I know how to sit, I don’t want to sit anymore, I’ve done it 12 times. I am done.

Q. Do you find them to be more of a perfectionist?

Brian: I used to joke that the Shepherd I had named Dori was a Lab with pointy ears. The Shepherd I have now, Kristen, is 100 percent Shepherd. She is a perfectionist. Shepherds are driven in a different way. You have to be more imaginative with their rewards; they like play as much as food. we do a lot of this; 30 seconds of training followed by 60 seconds of play, rather than food as their reward. They are more visually stimulated than labs; they look around as if their head is on a swivel. They use their eyes more, so, they can get more distracted than a Lab might. I prefer Shepherds. I find them to be more athletic; I can do more fun stuff with them. I know there are other raisers that have more experience with them. Every dog is different, some are great and some are tougher than others. As for the forms that the raiser asked about, I feel that I have done one with the last dog.

Comment: The form is separated; how many members in your family, are there kids, are there older people, did they take them to the zoos or fairs or concerts? Do they get along with animals such as cats, etc.? Are they working in the rural or city type things?

Brian: I think raisers would be thrilled to have a form like that. It’s an opportunity for us to brag like we do for our kid - he’s the best! I would love to fill out a form like that.

Q. Brian, did you find that your Shepherds got bored and they expressed it vocally?

Brian: Yes, they do get bored, much more easily than labs do. Shepherds are super vocal. They have a whole language of their own; little yelps, wines and tweaks. I can figure it out and learn about them.

Tina: How about routes? I take my Shepherd three or four blocks out of my way to get to work, which is stimulation for her. This gets her excited and we do a little dance!

Brian: They do like verbal praise a lot. Shepherds are super mouthy; they are like a little Jaws. I do not know if they are still like that when they get older though.

Tina: I always tell Kahlua, my Shepherd, to be gentle.

Brian: They always try to hold my hand in their mouth. I want to respond to something that Tina and Patrick said about scavenging. In our region, we really hit the “go place” super hard. In our region, we do not let our dogs into the kitchen. (I think that is a standard rule for us). That “go place” is at the end of the kitchen, so, they can still see us. When you get your dog, I would designate a spot in your house, hit that “go place” 1000 times and keep working it over and over. This might help with scavenging and getting in the way in the kitchen kind of thing.

Tina: My Shepherd, now six, has mellowed out a little bit. It’s as if she is saying, that is fine, I guess I cannot be as stubborn the way I used to be. My husband and I have a solid rule, don’t go into the kitchen, it is none of your business, go to your place. We have an open concept kitchen where she can watch us from her spot, a threshold. My husband will say, she is tilting her head, which happens if we drop a pan or she sees something that she likes. We are enforcing her “go place”, this is your special spot. It does really well for the dog. I do notice when she is in harness, she kind of has that transferable expectation.

Comment: I am a puppy raiser, in the same region as Brian. I have not raised a shepherd, but have sat for them a couple times - we do that swap thing, having them for a couple weeks at a time. It is so interesting to see how different the two breeds are. It was hilarious that virtually every lab that I have raised, (I am on #18) has been a terrible retriever, but, the two shepherds that I had were wonderful retrievers! House manners - we really do hammer on that because they have to be solid. I will confess, I do not keep my dogs out of the kitchen. The way our house is set up, an open floor plan, there is almost no place to put a “place” except for the kitchen, so, their spot is sort of in a corner. When the puppies are very little, I can confine them and they are right there where I can see them. I can reach out and control them so they cannot jump. I work really hard with my pups, actually we have been very successful - They do not try to get on the counter. All my pups that have gone on to become working guides have not had that as an issue. We did have one dog, back in 1999, about my third dog, that had terrible house manners. We knew there was something wrong with him. they sent somebody out to see if they could fix it, but, couldn’t. Fortunately, he was released for a different reason. By the way, it has been interesting to listen to all of this, thank you.

Becky: We are probably going to do this again sometime; hopefully, once a year.

Q. I am a first-time raiser from the Dutchess County Region in New York. I am getting ready to pass off my dog back to Guiding Eyes this weekend. This has been very, very helpful, especially with what Brian said earlier, “you want the dog, but somebody else needs the dog”. The bond with my dog was not instantaneous, it came over a period of time. I was wondering - graduates, because there is a relationship where you and the dog depend on each other, does the bond happen more quickly or is it something that is gradual? I guess circumstances and personalities would be different. Would somebody speak to that special bond that you have?

Becky: You hit it right when you said that circumstances and personalities are different. I bonded with my first dog very quickly. With my second dog, I did not bond immediately, but when we did, it was very strong. I am not sure why. My third and fourth dogs went pretty smoothly and the bond came quickly. Some of it depends on the dog’s personality, some of it depends on circumstance.

Annie: I agree with Becky, I went head over heels with my first dog. It was so easy. I remember saying to Becky, when is the other shoe going to drop? And you said to me, if it hasn’t dropped already, it is not going to. Then I got Bailey. He and I had an abbreviated bonding, because I went home sick in the middle of training. I did not get back to training with him for a couple of weeks. I think it helped the bond when I got him back, I was so happy, he was so happy – it was like we were never apart. That was my experience.

Pat: I love listening to these different stories. Some of the bond for me is always done immediately. Some of the travel around DC is big. there is always that one route that I drop to my knee, give the dog a big hug and think, man we are totally connected! this was pretty early on, within a couple of weeks to a month. There are always some tweaks along the way in the first six months or so. I can remember Hogan was doing pretty well when we arrived home, but there were some areas that we had to work on. One day, I realized that the more I jazzed him up before we left the house, saying fun things like; do you want to go to the Metro, let’s go, come on do you want to have some fun? He starts bouncing around - so happy. I put the harness on him and he took off like a rocket out the front door! He always gets a reward when he gets to the Metro. I remember dropping on a knee and giving him a little piece of a hotdog. he was so happy, I was so happy, that was the bond right there!

Tina: I love that question. It is so beautiful. Every dog is different, every person is different and every bond we form with our dogs is different. I was 18 when I got my first dog. I did not know what the heck I was doing, what the heck this dog was doing. The dog was probably saying the same thing about me, bless his heart. I remember, we formed a really, really strong bond, very special, very symbiotic. Then I received my German Shepherd. Brian and Leslie, who have raised German Shepherds, can attest to the fact that they are a one-man, one-woman, one-person dog. Everybody else is a prop in their life, a prop in the play. The moment I got Kahlua, she gravitated towards me very quickly. She comes right up when I talk to her, sits in my lap and nuzzles me with her pointy ears. I remember when my husband walked in the door, she kind of barked, uneasy with him. This bond took a little longer - that is just my experience. like I said, everybody’s different, special and beautiful.

Comment: I am a puppy raiser in the Montgomery Region. This is a response to one of the other questions. I just had a dog that graduated in October. When I sat down for the first time with this handler at graduation, he already knew so much about me from Guiding Eyes. So, I think they have already started to implement that. He knew that I was teaching in a classroom at the time I was raising this dog (Larson) and he was coming to school with me every day. the handler knew that Larson had been exposed to little kids. He was really excited because he has little cousins. I think Guiding Eyes has started sharing more from the final puppy raising survey that we do. Also, the other forms that were submitted by us.

Q. Thanks for this opportunity to ask a question. Most of our puppy raisers take their puppies out, I would say, at least 4 to 5 times a week to get them out into the community. I know that all guide dog users don’t necessarily work their dogs every day. So, if you are not working with your dog that day or if the weather is bad, is there something that you might do with them?

Tina: I grew up in Chicago. I don’t remember a day that was not bad; whether it is scorching hot and humid - you are dripping with sweat, or, you are freezing - the wind would go through your coat, your mittens, your scarf. I work full-time about an hour and a half from home. I take the train, bus or underground rail. It is a 12-hour day. She comes with me. Shepherds probably would tear the house apart if they were not with us. I put a coat and booties on her if it rains, sleets, or snows. I give her a lot of encouragement and a lot of verbal praise when I think the weather is pretty bad. Sometimes, I will try to catch an Uber, which is a different story, we all know as users, it is a separate beast, litigation and all of that. There are a few places that I will not take my dog. I absolutely refuse to take her to the zoo. I think that is putting the dog in danger in some parts of the zoo.

Becky: Things changed a little bit for me when I retired. Ron, my husband, is also a guide dog user. We don’t necessarily go the same place every day. As such, we developed routes in the community where we live. We created two or three different routes. We would use GPS to learn what the street names are and where they were. Sometimes, it was a matter of trial and error. We wanted something for us to do every day with the dogs, both for their good and for our own good. If the weather is really horrible and it can be, even in Charlotte, we play inside. we play tug, do obedience games, things like that to keep the dog stimulated.

Pat: A couple of thoughts. It is really an important question. Hogan works most days, 13 out of 14. The day that we are not working, we definitely get some form of fetch in - even if it is indoors. I happen to have a dog who loves to run from one end of my house to the other. It is carpeted, so, he has a great time with his ball. I have a fenced in area outside that I can take him to when it is good weather. I like him to be out there; to let his guide dog hair down and have fun. We do the best we can – a nice mix. I put a lot of work into it because it keeps him sharp.

Annie: I retired in 2019. I had some injuries to my knee. so, Bailey has had to adjust to my modifications. I have to say, he has never been afraid of me using my support cane. he automatically knew what I wanted from him - I didn’t have to correct him or anything. He would make the adjustments for the cane and me. We are going out and doing things again. Sometimes, he does not want to go when it’s raining. I do not push him; he is almost 10 and ready to retire. It is kind of nice that he wants to be left home, but there are still times when he wants to be with me. We have another dog; they play a lot with toys and tug. They are always going out together – my husband walks them on leisure walks because I am somewhat limited in how long I can actually walk. Bailey’s retirement has been coming for the last year or two. It is nice letting it happen gradually and not stressing out over it. it has been a really good experience.

Becky: I would like to thank our panelists, Brian, Karen, Val and Gayle. We really appreciate you coming on and answering questions - being a part of this; for Pat, Tina and Annie. Of course, thanks to our Council President Andrea, the council members, Melissa and everybody else

Andrea: Becky, thank you, I think you covered it all. anyone that still has questions or comments, send them to gebgradcouncil@gmail.com. we will monitor that mailbox and make sure you get a response.

Thank you so much, puppy raisers, for who you are and what you do. There are not enough words to express the appreciation that we all feel for you and all you do!