**Graduate Quarterly Call October 29, 2023 summary**

**Topic: Updates from the Training Department**

Jose Lopez-Masso, Graduate Council Interim President, welcomed everyone and thanked them for joining the call.

Jose announced, with sincere regret, that Gerald Brenninkmeyer, the new Director of Training, was unable to attend as planned. He thanked Caryn Fellows, Trainee Manager, and Miranda Beckmann, foundation Manager, for serving as the panelists for the evening.

Jose invited Graduate Council members to introduce themselves and say a few words.

Pat Leahy, Council Corresponding Secretary, with guide dog Hogan, reminded everyone that the book club will meet on November 6, 2023. All are welcome to join the discussion with Christie Bane, author of “Forward Together.” To subscribe to their email list or have questions, send an email to the book club at: guidedogbookclub@gmail.com.

Council member Becky Davidson, partnered with Ballad, reminded graduates that have questions for the Council, questions relating to a Quarterly Call, or general comments, to send an email to the Graduate Council mailbox at: gebgradcouncil@gmail.com.

Cindy LaBon, Recording Secretary, reminisced that today was the 11-year anniversary of Hurricane Sandy, noting that she was class training with her first Guiding Eyes guide dog, Gardenia. Goodman is Cindy’s second guide dog.

Tina Reisner, Council member, was pleased with the numerous participants and thanked everyone for joining. She is currently working with a sweet German Shepherd named Kahlua.

Council member, Judy Matthews, a Colorado Springs resident, has been working with her new guide dog, Lyons, for two months now.

Andrea Conner with guide dog Gretzky is serving as President Emerita (Immediate Past President), supporting the Council as needed.

Graduate Council member Ashley Townsend, and her first Guiding Eyes guide dog, Lolly, live in Denver. Ashley was happy to be on the call, having joined the Council in April 2023.

Tina introduced the guest speaker, Caryn Fellows. Miranda Beckmann arrived a little later.

Caryn began her career at Guiding Eyes seventeen years ago as an apprentice, now known as a trainee. Gerald Brenninkmeyer was her instructor, leading her on a path to being a competent Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) for many years. About a year and a half ago, Caryn took the position of Trainee Manager. In this role, Caryn is currently overseeing ten trainees, formerly known as apprentices. She gets to know, to some degree, nearly every dog that comes through the program.

Caryn gave an overview of what the Training Department currently looks like.

Our training cycle is about twenty weeks with an option of dogs staying a bit longer if necessary. Each trainer carries a maximum of eight dogs through that cycle – a mix of dogs just getting started and some further along in the process. The dog trainers and the faculty (class instructors) are separate units, with schedules that often do not align.

The new title for the class instructor is Placement Specialist. Their primary role is class instruction with clients/students. They work two weeks in class with clients, then out on other duties, such as fieldwork. They will follow this schedule, with three classes remaining this year, a Christmas/Holiday Season break, then resume the two-week class schedule beginning January 8, 2024. The goal for the current fiscal year, ending September 30, 2024, is to exceed the 150 graduate teams placed in the fiscal year that ended this past September.

**Q&A:**

Question from a puppy raiser: Why is the figure eight lead so short?

Answer: This is a new piece of equipment used in the Puppy Program. Even though Caryn could not say what the protocol was in their program, she used it herself. It is like a head collar, used with a short leash. It prevents the dog from lunging for something.

Question: How do you transition a puppy to not rely on a check in with eye contact?

Answer: Having a dog that is connected to the trainer is a wonderful place to start. They teach other skills, e.g., looking at the environment and taking queues from that environment. That transfers to other skills, like doors, curbs, and steps. They also teach lead out – they teach them that the queue to go forward means to look forward and to walk forward. The trainers want the dogs to check in with them when the dog is not sure what to do. They would rather have the dog look at them than for the dog to pursue its own interests.

Even if there is not direct eye contact between a blind handler and the dog when the dog checks in with the handler, it shows that the dog wants to know what to do next. Dogs will touch their handler with their nose to alert the handler that they are checking in.

There was a brief discussion on the “touch” command; how it is used to redirect the dog’s attention to the handler. Some dogs will gently bump their nose on their handler, while in motion, when they have knowingly ignored a possible distraction or performed a task correctly.

Jose welcomed Miranda Beckmann and asked her to introduce herself, then jump in and answer the next question.

Miranda is the Foundation Manager for the Training Department. She also helps oversee the equipment room with Lori Busse. Graduates will most likely hear from Lori if they reach out about equipment.

Question: Describe the different types of trainers. How does each trainer interact with each dog?

Answer: Within the training department, there are Foundation GDMIs, who are the people Miranda predominantly works with. They are qualified Guide Dog Mobility Instructors who are not necessarily doing the placements, but they do train the dogs. They typically have quite a bit of experience with class and/or dog training. They are currently all the Foundation GDMIs - the people that were qualified Guide Dog Mobility Instructors under the old system.

Guide dog trainers are people who have decided to go along a path where they are only going to work with the dogs, and do not work directly with the clients. GEB has trainee versions; GDMI Trainees whose career path will bring them into class and work with the clients. There are also trainee dog trainers, whose career path is similar to the GDMI trainee, but they have only observed class, not learned how to instruct a client. If the trainee decides to pursue the GDMI role, they will be taught how to work with the client. Placement Specialists: Kat Poallo, Shannon McGee, Michelle Tang, and Dan Weesner are the current group of class instructors, having a minimum of five years as a qualified GDMI, often having many more years’ experience with dog and class training.

The current group of Placement Specialists (class instructors) receive the fully trained dogs at the start of their respective classes. These dogs have been matched with the applicant by the Foundation Manager, Miranda Beckmann, and her team.

Question: If an applicant is on the wait list and they feel their needs or desires have changed, e.g., pace, environment or how they travel, how should they revise their application?

Answer: Reach out to a Client Navigator or the Admissions Department and update them with anything to do with your application; a new address, rural versus urban, public transportation and the like; if you feel your pace has changed or dog preference. Keep in mind that a breed and/or gender preference may increase your wait time for a new dog. Most Guiding Eyes dogs fall into a medium pace, with the pool of slower or faster dogs being small, which also extends the wait time.

Question: If a guide dog has been given ample time to “get busy” before a walk and relieves itself while in harness, e.g., about a half mile down the road, how can the dog be discouraged from doing so?

Answer: Some dogs need stimulation by walking to get busy. If you know your dog eliminates three blocks into a route, stop at 2 ½ blocks, remove the harness and give the dog the opportunity to get busy. each day, shorten the distance you remove the dog’s harness, developing a better pattern. Ideally, the dog will begin to indicate that he needs to stop, have his harness removed, and then eliminate. We recognize that this can be frustrating to deal with. Try to figure out the dog’s pattern and get creative with ways to work it out.

Question: Are Guiding Eyes dogs still trained to get busy in between parked cars in the parking lanes of the city?

Answer: Yes, we try to make sure our dogs understand parking off the curb. They are encouraged to eliminate on solid surfaces, e.g., asphalt or concrete. It can be difficult to establish during training because schedules can be unpredictable. It may take some time for a new young dog to understand where his new handler expects him to eliminate when they return home, regardless of the type of surface.

Question: Is Guiding Eyes working on getting Specialized Training Program (STP) applicants into class more quickly?

Answer: Under the new model, the STP Guide Dog Mobility Instructors travel less. Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructors (RGDMI), formerly known as Field Reps, are helping with STP client follow-ups. Previously, all STP interviews, follow ups – basic field work, were done by the STP team themselves, which put them on the road for extensive periods of time and slowed down the training progress. There are four Specialized Training Instructors: Ellin Purcell, Andrea Martine, Susan Kroha, and Louise Thompson. They are working with a group of sixteen dogs. The dogs get their starter training in the regular program. Once the temperament of a dog has been identified that fits a prospective client, the dog is moved into the Specialized Training Program to continue its training.

Question: How much time are the folks that are training dogs spending under blindfold? How much time are they observing blind people?

Answer: The training department sets up mini classes that last about a week. The new staff, while blindfolded, go through a typical class experience; a one-on-one instructor, a juno walk, being assigned a guide dog, working/training in White Plaines, and caring for the dog.

Also, they have shadowed an entire class, observing the Placement Specialist and the clients. They are in the process of setting up a rotating schedule so everyone will be able to observe class events on a continuous basis. Trainees are eligible to shadow the Placement Specialist when they are out on local fieldwork. Many Outreach Events occur that give trainees more opportunity to learn.

Question: Am I understanding correctly that Placement Specialists do not work with dogs, they are only class instructors?

Answer: Yes. They do not have dogs assigned to them, but they do have the option of filling in when a Foundation GDMI is out for any extended amount of time, e.g., vacation, sick leave, etc.

Question: Do the Foundation GDMIs ever become Placement Specialists?

Answer: Potentially, if an opening is available, they would apply and interview. Foundation GDMIs have the option of rotating into class one or two times a year if they are considering a career working with clients in class.

Question: Why is the traditional training model that Guiding Eyes had been following no longer sufficient?

Answer: We could not bring twelve people into class for health and safety reasons. As a result, we had the opportunity to look at the way we were doing things. This allowed us to try and improve our work life balance. The new model allows the staff to work on a continuous basis. Because of this, a Dog can remain with its Foundation GDMI for further training if necessary. Chances are, a Placement Specialist may not be in favor of working with a string of eight dogs again, nor all Foundation GDMIs be willing to go back to a class rotation.

Question: How are the dogs responding to the new model?

Answer: There is a lot less attachment when the dog goes into class because the Foundation GDMI (dog trainer) is not there, with the client and Placement Specialist.

Question: Are clients given the opportunity to speak with their new dog trainer/Foundation GDMI?

Answer: Yes. A day is set aside during class for the client to meet and speak with every individual that worked with their dog. If you have Home Training, this opportunity is also available.

Question: Is there a specific age when a client is no longer eligible to receive a guide dog?

Answer: No, there is no age limitation. It is about individual abilities.

Some working situations are not safe for guide dogs. Example: Kitchen work. The dog would have to be in a safe place away from the kitchen area.

Jose thanked everyone. He announced that another call will be scheduled with staff from the training department to answer remaining questions.