Graduate Quarterly Call January 28, 2024 Summary

Topic: Update from the Training Department, Part Two

Graduate Council Interim President, Jose Lopez-Masso, welcomed everyone. He introduced the Council members that were present.

Jose was pleased to introduce guest speaker, Gerald Brenninkmeyer, Director of Training at Guiding Eyes.

Becky Davidson, Council member and facilitator, began reading questions for the training department and Gerald, submitted prior to the call.

Note: Hereafter, Gerald Brenninkmeyer will be referred to for brevity by initials GB

Question: How did you get into guide dog work?

GB: A service dog school held their graduation on the college campus where I was attending classes. It looked interesting, and I soon began volunteering for a service dog school. I grew up near Westchester, so I was familiar with Guiding Eyes. I began working in the kennels, then spent a year and a half working as an apprentice at GEB. I then became a Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI), worked in the Home Training and Action Programs. I gained experience working both on the dog training side and on the human side of the guide dog experience. When Dell Rodman left and the position of Director of Training opened, I was eager to apply.

Question: What is your biggest challenge as Director of Training?

GB: The biggest challenge is always making sure that all parts of the program are working well together.

Question: Do we currently have a fully staffed training department?

GB: Almost. We have 9 Foundation Trainers (the people who train the dogs). I would like to see 10 Foundation Trainers, but that type of training takes several years of experience. We have a kennel capacity of 150 dogs. We can make do with the training staff that we currently have. We don’t have a lot more room for more dogs at this point, but we could increase our ability to get more people learning to become trainers.

Question: Is a new kennel being built?

GB: It is still in the planning stages. We’re in the design process. There is back-and-forth on getting permits, therefore, we haven’t broken ground.

Question: Describe the current home training process.

GB: The home training application is not much different from the residential application. We had 33 home trainings in 2023; we were supposed to have 34. specialized trainings are also home trainings. 13 specialized home trainings were done in 2023. The bulk of our training is still residential. We had 100 residential trainings in 2023. The majority of home trainings were done by GDMIs. The major drawback to home training is that you don’t get the same camaraderie in home training that you get in the residential program.

Question: How many residential classes did we have in 2023?

GB: We had 24 residential classes in 2023. There were between 4 and 6 students per class. In 2024, we hope to have 6 students per class consistently. Instructors (Placement Specialists) go into class with a lead instructor. Foundation Trainers are also being invited to attend class. The goal for 2024 is to have between 155 and 160 graduates. Class capacity is up from two years ago. Even if we were to break ground on the new kennel, we’re still looking two years out so we couldn’t fill it to capacity until we plan for it.

Question: What is the status of the White Plains lounge?

GB: We’re at a new facility in White Plains at 170 Hamilton. It’s not too far from Maine Street. It’s in a building with a pancake house. There is a big open seating area, a dining area, office area and kitchen area. The third class just started using this location. The lounge, formerly a dental office, was very small. This new space is a lot larger. It lends itself to more indoor training, such as targeting. We’ve gotten great feedback from the classes who have been in this space.

Question: How many Specialized Training Program (STP) graduates were there in 2023? Do STP students ever come to campus?

GB: Four students came to campus last year; most are trained at home. Guiding Eyes has gravitated more to home training for the specialized students. The waiting list for the Specialized Training Program is a bit longer, currently around 2 1/2 years. Ellen Purcell, Andrea Martine, Susan Kroha, and Louise Thompson comprise the STP team. This team will continue functioning the way it currently is. There is a limited number of dogs that qualify for the Specialized Training Program. These dogs are unique in many ways; dogs with different personalities to meet a student’s diverse needs. We take a dog, exaggerate the plusses, and mitigate the minuses.

Question: How many matches were made in the Running Guide Program (RGP) in 2023? Is there a dedicated staff for this program? Is there a specific waiting list for running guides? Is it growing, staying the same, etc.?

GB: I don’t know the exact number of matches. Payden Hubbert, a runner herself, is on staff in this program, holding the title, Running Guides Specialist. She is currently representing Guiding Eyes at Ski for Light. She puts several miles on the running dogs in training. We have students with different types of running needs. We see a lot of demand. Some people run every day; other people run twice a week.

Question: Regarding the wait list: Are returning graduates prioritized on the wait list?

GB: Matching depends on where you fall on the list in terms of your needs. We look at the dogs we can expect to come into training this year; this gives us a ballpark of what types of dogs we have. If you are a 4-mile-per-hour walker, that dog is less common than a 3-mile-per-hour dog. We can serve people with a middle-of-the-road pace more quickly. We try to set realistic expectations, so that people aren’t disappointed when they find out that their wait time for a dog will be longer. There Is no point in getting your medical done if we’re not going to have a dog ready for you within one year’s time.

Question: Regarding GDMI’s: Graduates speak highly of their regional GDMI’s. However, we’re noticing that the time between GDMI check-ins is increasing. Also, the method of communication is more likely to be virtual than a visit.

GB: We have more regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructors (RGDMI) than we have ever had before. There are currently 8 of them. Each one does at least 3 home trainings per year. These RGDMIs are on the road quite a bit. For graduates living in remote areas, that singular visit becomes a three-day trip. We see some overlap between a visit from an RGDMI and questions the Client Experience Team can answer.

Question: What is the role of the Client Navigator?

GB: Jessy DiNapoli and Laurel Sheets resigned, taking positions elsewhere. As a result, we are redistributing the duties of the Client Experience Team. It is a bit of a puzzle. Ben Cawley has taken over some of the Client Navigator responsibilities. Liz Lange is also helping. Right now, they are delegating calls to different people. Formerly, instructors answered incoming graduate calls. Now we have a dedicated team for those calls.

Question: When you’re on a call, how do you get to the root of a problem? How do you do the follow-up and make sure things are being implemented?

GB: These questions are best directed to the Client Experience Team.

Question: Please discuss the criteria being used to evaluate dogs for readiness to transition from training to class.

GB: We have increased the trainer/instructor blindfold testing with the dogs. For the most part, the dogs are on a 20-week cycle. At 16 weeks in the cycle, the dogs are evaluated as to who will be best matched with a particular dog. We then take that dog into the environments the potential handler will work in. Regarding behaviors: Expectations haven’t changed. We use more food rewards during training; we’ve found that the dog’s work is more accurate. You could give more physical praise and verbal praise, but an occasional treat is more powerful in the end.

Question: What is the training department doing regarding house manners?

GB: There are different definitions of good house manners, depending on your household. What is neat? What is clean? We focus on prevention with the young pups. It is hard to undo errors in house manners. Getting on the furniture and Counter surfing must be nipped in the bud early. We don’t want dogs coming into training with a question mark behind them. We evaluate the dogs’ behaviors by placing them in different homes at times, a process called puppy swapping. When the dogs come in for training at Guiding Eyes, they are kenneled most of the time. When the handler goes home with their new dog, they must go back into prevention mode. You gradually give the dog more freedom as time goes on.

Question: How have success rates changed with the integration of Foundation Trainers going into class?

GB: This new model allows for more flexibility for the dogs in their training cycle. The trainers also have more flexibility; Do they just want to train dogs, or do they want to do both parts? Our Placement Specialists are phenomenal; they know more readily what steps to take. This has allowed us to fit people into areas where their strengths are. We run into more difficulty with the apprentices. We normally look two years out, so it’s hard to say whether it has been more successful or not. Instructors are no longer staying overnight in the dorms for the residential program. However, a nurse is always there.

Question: What additional training is Guiding Eyes able to offer regarding Specialized Training?

GB: We have some students who are deaf-blind and some students that have balance or gait differences. These students use a harness handle that offers more stability. We still do not offer wheelchair guides. A Specialized trainer will go work with someone prior to that person getting a dog in order to assess the potential client’s needs and readiness for a dog.

Question: Does Guiding Eyes offer dual purpose guide dogs, e.g., emotional support, diabetic alert, etc.?

GB: No. We offer guide dogs first and foremost.

Comment: The wait list is a major concern for many graduates.

GB: We are adding anywhere from 20 to 30 dogs per month to the available dog pool after the completion of the final stages of their training. We can’t tell you how long it will take for you to be matched with a guide dog without knowing your specific needs so we can compare that information to the dogs we have.

Question: When Placement Specialists go into class on a regular basis, they get to learn about people who are blind and visually impaired. How are apprentices able to train dogs effectively if they don’t observe the day-to-day needs and lives of people with vision loss often?

GB: Right now, we have a healthy balance of apprentice trainers and GDMI’s. It hasn’t really shifted. Caryn Fellows is doing most of the instruction for apprentices. Our apprentices come into class once or twice a year. We’re giving them more class exposure, finding ways to incorporate more experiences, interact with, and learn from different students at varying points in time. Field work, such as shadowing an experienced GDMI on a home interview or follow up visit, is another important aspect for apprentices.

Gerald concluded by asking graduates for more effective ways he can communicate with us. Comments and questions can be sent to the Council mailbox at: gebgradcouncil@gmail.com

Your message will then be forwarded to him.

Graduate Council member, Pat, thanked everyone for attending. He made the following announcements:

Applications for a position on the Graduate Council are due by February 9, 2024.

A Grief and Bereavement call is planned for February 22, 2024.

The Book Club is expecting to meet in March or April. Book title will be announced soon.

If you have a topic you would like the Graduate Council to consider for a future Quarterly call, send an email to: gebgradcouncil@gmail.com