



Prologue

On February 5, 2008, I was approached by guide dog instructor, David Ponce from Guide Dogs of America (GDA) to participate in an upcoming class for a few days under blindfold. The idea intrigued me, and I immediately became interested in the idea. How could I, as a new executive officer benefit from this experience. Well, I could learn more about the training the instructors provide, it would give me perspective from a consumer point of view and it would make me more aware of the type of training provided by an in-residence program. This would be a learning experience I couldn't pass up. I decided that this would need to be arranged soon and proceeded to work with GDA staff on the details.

Five Days under Blindfold

On Sunday, January 11, 2009, I arrived at Burbank International Airport full of anxiety. I was nervous about what the next four days would bring. As I stepped out of the terminal and into the open air, I was greeted by two Guide Dogs of America staff members. David Ponce, a guide dog instructor and Annemarie Esposito, an apprentice took my bags, slipped on my blindfold, and led me over to wait in baggage claim for my classmate Darryl to arrive. The first thing I noticed was the warmth of the Burbank sun. Next, I met my classmate and immediately said, "How tall are you," in which he replied, "I'm six feet five". I thought, whew, that sensory area is stronger than I thought.

The day proceeded with a brief tour of the campus, unloading of my suitcase and general orientation of my room. I learned how to trail walls with my right hand and proceeded to do ten laps around my room saying out loud, "closet, bed, table, curtains, ouch, table, chair, desk, closet, bathroom, sink, door." I quickly learned the table next to the chair was my enemy.

Later that evening, our class met on the couches for our first set of lectures. We learned a couple of the basic guide dog obedience commands like sit, down, stay and come. Dinner was next, and by this time, I was quite hungry. At 6:00 PM, our class sat down for our first of many meals together. I quickly found cherry tomatoes and olives are more slippery than I thought. And then, my sight dependency took over. I wanted to know who everyone was, how old they were, etc. I needed to "see" who I was going to spend the next few days with. Everyone was very friendly and answered all of my questions. Dinner went well; we came back for one more lecture and headed off to bed.

Day two started off with a couple of curve balls. Each student was asked to walk a straight line (between cones) from the doors of the facility to a megaphone where instructors observed students' gait and pace. Immediately I found myself outside of my comfort zone wanting a cane, a guide dog, or at least a wall to trail. I started to ask myself if I could do this, if I could be away from home for a month like the first time students do, away from my family, learning to enhance my mobility skills and training with a guide dog. That night I went to bed that night unsure of myself, hopefully optimistic I would learn.

Day three was a fresh start. I really started to enjoy the company of my classmates. The class went offsite to a dental office in San Fernando. We practiced Juno which is when a guide dog handler simulates working with a guide dog named Juno; using guide dog commands, as in a normal daily routine. We told jokes and began asking each other, after each Juno session, "How did you do?" Everyone seemed pretty confident. Juno was behaving and we were getting some new commands like halt, left, right, forward and hop up. I was on day two with my white cane and began feeling more confident walking around the dorm. Night came and my nine classmates and I started harassing our instructors Patti, Annemarie and David about our guide dogs. When we would meet them, what did they look like, could we sneak to the kennel, etc. Night interviews with the instructors solidified which guide dogs we would be paired up with the following day.

Day four, Guide Dog Day. Class number 360 started out with high anxiety and anticipation. My classmates and I knew that Juno would turn into a real guide dog in a few hours, we couldn't wait. Wake up call came and breezed by at 6:00 AM. Everyone had a little extra giggle at breakfast and the questions began rolling at lecture. We were instructed that we needed to be patient and the instructors exclaimed repeatedly, "We will cover that in an upcoming lecture." Juno arrived at the dentist office in San Fernando that day acting a bit unruly. My Juno in particular decided to change direction in the middle of a crosswalk. I wasn't sure how to react, but quickly ran down every command I was taught in a panic. I returned to my class and we all felt a bit nervous and defeated by our lacking skills with disobedient Juno.

Afternoon came and went, and the time came for class 360 to meet on the couches and hear about our guide dogs was finally here. Each student was read a name of a dog, its birthday and weight. We were each to return to our rooms, sit on our beds, and wait for an instructor to enter the room with the guide dog, meet the dog, and have some bonding time.

Wink, or Mr. Wink as I called him, rolled into my dorm room with David. He smelled around my room and then we came face to face. This was the first time I was tempted to remove my blindfold and peek. Wink, on the other hand, must have read my mind as he began to try and lick the blindfold off of my face. I put him on tie down and we had play time together and bonded. I left my room with Wink, along with my black sweat suit covered in blonde hairs, to join my classmates and their guides on the couches. Each person thought their dog was cuter than the rest, but all were equally happy and excited. We went to dinner together that night with full stomachs and full hearts excited for our first walks the next day.

Last day with Wink and class 360...I woke up anxious on Thursday, not knowing how my last day would be. We all woke up with a water call over the loud speaker, followed by a relieving break outside our rooms. All students exclaiming "get busy, busy, busy" in unison. Breakfast followed and we discussed our outing for the day. We boarded our bus, and by this time I learned that the bus was not moving up, and my face became a bit less green with use of chewing gum.

We arrived at a park in a suburban neighborhood. Folding chairs were spread out and the instructors began taking turns with each student as they took their first walks with their guide dog. Emotions ran high. For many, this was the first experience walking independently with a guide dog. They imagined waking up each morning at home, with confidence, knowing that

they didn't have to worry anymore. I heard my name called last, and I boarded a minivan for my first walk.

As this was my last day, the instructors thought it best that I have an accelerated first walk. I walked through a neighborhood, and then ultimately, walked a mini strip mall. Wink led me around trees, garbage cans, stacks of wood and leaves on the ground. He was such a good guide and suddenly, my posture began to improve. With each step, I knew he was going to do the right thing, I just needed to follow my instincts and trust him.

We came back to the school and I was dropped off at my room. The instructors gave me some time to gather my thoughts and spend time with Wink. I sat on the floor, alone with my guide dog. Tears began to pour. I thought of all of the things I had learned about life and myself over the last few days. I learned that the world is just as beautiful with my other senses as with my sight alone. I learned that my classmates were just like me, married, or working, a student or retired, just trying to live everyday to the fullest. I learned that my instructors chose a profession that gets back exponentially what it gives and I learned that my guide dog was the smartest, most intuitive dog I had ever met. How could I leave these people, how could I leave this dog? Many tears and many goodbyes later and I found myself back at home.

Epilogue

I will never forget my experience in class 360 at Guide Dogs of America as long as I live. I was part of an intimate experience with nine other wonderful people who accepted me as one of them. I will cherish each moment I spend with this Board and all of the stakeholders we serve. I now feel a part of a community of people that care about making guide dog mobility a safe, rewarding and reliable means of travel for thousands to come.