Graduate Quarterly Call July 28, 2024 Summary

Topic: Senior Staff Discuss Ongoing Efforts and Update from Admissions

Panel: Laura Peterman, Chief of Staff and Nikki Wentz, Admissions Manager

Pat Leahy, Graduate Council President, welcomed everyone. He was thrilled to have this time for fellowship, to share thoughts, ideas and address questions from graduates. He was pleased to have Laura Peterman, Nikki Wentz and Melissa Carney, “three great professionals with us.”

After a brief explanation of a few Zoom commands from Council member Tina Reisner, Pat continued with introductions.

Laura Peterman: She has been with Guiding Eyes for six years, serving as Chief of Staff, which includes working across the Leadership Team on several strategic projects. She oversees admissions, Client Experience, housekeeping, nursing and dining. Prior to her current role, she was Thomas Panek’s Executive Assistant. Laura holds a communications and art history degree, as well as a diploma from the French Culinary Institute. She has had an eclectic career, ranging from culinary and restaurant management to estate management to real estate. Laura lives in New York with her husband, two sons and two dogs. In her free time, Laura gardens and hikes the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains.

Nikki Wentz: Her love of dogs started at an early age; Nikki was a puppy raiser while growing up. Her interest in dogs and their training was the focus of her college education, with a major in animal behavior. Nikki has been working at Guiding Eyes for almost 13 years, moving up the ranks to Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) to her current position as the Admissions Manager.

Laura thanked Pat for the introduction and was happy to be invited as a panelist. She greeted everyone. She mentioned meeting Council member Judy Mathews at the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) conference back in July. Laura is thrilled to be taking on her new assignment, overseeing the Client Experience Team and working with Nikki. In addition to this change, Ben Cawley and Shanon Walsh, because of their expertise in dog training, moved over to the training department - Laura said, “to get more dogs ready for placement, to get dogs in our applicant’s hands!”

Another change was noted: client experience and nursing have blended as a unit. From the beginning of an application to campus or home training, nursing is part of the entire process, hence, this change. Laura continued, there is no plan to change the current two-week class training model which has been working out well. The two students with one instructor have resulted in positive feedback.

Nikki, with her light-hearted character, jumped in, thanking Pat for the introduction! October will be Nikki’s thirteen-year anniversary at Guiding Eyes. She acknowledged having met several graduates on the call over the years in her role as a GDMI in class or home training, or most recently as a Regional GDMI covering the Southeast region of the US. Nikki currently lives in North Carolina, where she will continue her duties remotely, going up to Yorktown Heights as needed. Nikki gave an overview of the members of the Client Experience Team.

Liz Lange, Admissions Coordinator, will be an applicant’s first point of contact, guiding you through the application process.

Meka White, Client Navigator and fellow graduate, is instrumental in the process – handling inquiry calls and offering peer and graduate support alongside Melissa Carney, Community Outreach and Graduate Support Manager.

Danielle Cuenoud, Learning and Development Manager, oversees an applicant’s orientation and mobility references, as well as campus accessibility improvements, and helps students prepare for their transition to a guide dog.

The team is currently working to update the application, streamlining the process for returning graduates, making the application itself more user friendly, all while getting the information they need.

Q & A began, alternating between questions from attendees and those from the mailbag. (presubmitted).

Q. Assuming there are GDMIs that only train dogs and GDMIs that only instruct students in class, how much time does a GDMI working with a student have to work the dogs going into class?

A. Placement Specialists, Cat, Dan, Michelle and Shannon McGee are the primary GDMIs going into class instructing students and do not have a string of dogs. They typically spend the 2 weeks prior to class getting to know the dogs. They also have other GDMIs that rotate into class, sometimes working with students and dogs they have trained. It is a mixed experience, which they have found to benefit both the student and the dog in that the team bonds more quickly.

Q. are there still folks that are assigned to come out for a home visit if a graduate has an issue?

A. There are seven staff members that make up the Regional Guide Dog Mobility team. Their job is to cover those visits in the field, with a goal of a visit every 2 years. However, if a team feels they need a visit sooner, they are welcome to contact their RGDMI directly or call the Client Experience number and select the option for training help.

Q.I am interested in applying for a dog in the Specialized Training Program. What advice would you pass along?

A. All applicants fill out the same application form. Conversations during the home interview, and the Committee Review Board, will determine the program best suited for the applicant. This applies to home training too. The goal is to have the team be successful.

Q. how long is the wait for a successor dog? How many Shepherds and Labs are being placed?

A. The average wait time is one year, but there are many variables that can affect the time; are you training in class or home, in the Specialized Training Program (STP), pace you walk, or the kind of dog you need. There are approximately 5% German Shepherds and 95% Labs in the breeding and training programs. Applicants choosing to be matched with a German Shepherd are waiting three to four years.

Q. can you give an update on the off-site kennel project; how it is coming along and when to expect its completion?

A. they are projecting to break ground in January 2025 with completion around August 2026. They are working on the final design, in which Dr. Beth Brenninkmeyer is an instrumental part. “We want it to be state-of-the-art, all about the well-being, health and wellness of our dogs; a great facility for our kennel staff, GDMs, and veterinary staff to work in.” the design is setup in podlike sections, each housing several dogs and their kennel staff, which will cut down on the transmission of viruses and contain any illness. The new kennel, approximately 30,000 square feet, will be built on purchased land approximately one one-half miles from the training center in Yorktown Heights. when the new kennel facility is completed, the dogs and the veterinary hospital will move in. it was also noted that dogs coming in for IFT will have their own pod.

Q. My current and first guide dog is a six-year-old Lab and working well, although I would have preferred a German Shepherd. How do I know what signs to look for and is there an age that will help me know when to begin the application process? why is there only a 5% group of German Shepherds in the training program?

A. there is not a magic number. Keep in touch with your RGDMI; they are helpful at assessing the safety and effectiveness of a guide dog team. Meka and Melissa from the Client Experience Team are available to offer peer support; to know what to expect, how to get yourself ready, what to look for in your dog. The average age our dogs retire is between eight and ten years of age. It is wise to remember to apply early, even if your dog is working well and only six or seven years old, if you want home training or a German Shepherd. Historically, Labs have been the healthiest and most requested dogs, hence, Guiding Eyes has put the most resources into breeding and training Labs. The Training Department and Genetics Team determine the ratio of dogs available.

Comment: Some graduates feel there is less of a family identity or familiarity with Guiding Eyes.

Response: Laura, new in her role, asked for a little background, detail, and specific examples to help her understand.

Several graduates responded with comments:

“I have not been there in recent years, but I’ve heard people are going to other schools. When you walked in the door, everybody knew you, they came to greet you, you got treated like you were family.”

“it’s not the application process, it’s being at the school, from arriving and being greeted by various staff that became friends during the application and waiting period; staff that made you feel like you came home.”

“I’ve heard a couple of grads say they miss the chairs in the foyer/lobby area, a place used by students to congregate as a group.”

Response: Laura said that there are two chairs and a small table in that area, just outside a Placement Specialist’s office. She continued saying that students, instructors, nurses, and some of the Leadership team members gather for a “Meet & Greet” and share a little about themselves on Tuesday morning, the day after students arrive on campus for training. Laura has begun to make time to join the class for dinner one evening, which has given everyone time to engage in conversation, offering feedback and areas where improvements could be made.

Laura acknowledged that connecting with people through the application process and then reconnecting with them when you arrive on campus is important.

Laura appreciated that Pat asked attendees to send their thoughts and feedback to him and will then send to Laura and Nikki for their review and consideration. “We try to make the best experience for our applicants, students and graduates.”

Comment: Another graduate shared that she felt the application itself was more difficult than the application for her previous three dogs. The graduate noted that Nikki is aware of the situation. Her other issue relates to fundraising and soliciting donations. The graduate and her dog were filmed for an advertisement focusing on the local bank’s accessibility efforts. In turn, the bank donated to Guiding Eyes in the graduate’s name. The graduate has also made annual donations to Guiding Eyes on Giving Tuesday. A couple of weeks after her last donation, she received a donation request letter from Guiding Eyes. She felt that GEB was not satisfied with her donation amount, so they were asking for more.

Response: Laura apologized to the graduate on behalf of GEB, for how this made her feel. She will look into how the automatic mass mailings are sent out. “No donation is too small in our eyes,” Laura declared.

Comment: This graduate’s comment centered around the communication from staff during the wait-time for a successor dog. In the past, she would get an occasional call with an update, which made her feel GEB was keeping her in the loop, that they had not forgotten about her. She is not sure who her client Navigator is and would like more regular updates.

Response: Nikki added clarity; there is not an assigned Client Navigator per person. Meka is the only navigator by title. They are managing things as a group effort; looking at shifting how the communications are managed by the team as the Client Experience Team is restructured.

Comment: “I got my first dog in 2012. There were twelve people in class; we became a family that many of us still communicate with. I am wondering if fewer people in class and less opportunity to get to know the group has something to do with less family feel?”

Response: Laura weighed in, sharing her recent experience when she had dinner with the last class, a group of six students, some of them first-timers and some retrains. This was an increase from the usual four students. The feedback from the group was that the smaller class of four during Covid was appropriate then, and the six now felt right. Laura recognizes that everyone has a different feeling about numbers and other factors, but this group felt the six was good, with a ratio of two students to one instructor. They were a close-knit group, leaning on each other for support, whether they were retiring their last dog or those that were getting their first dog.

Comment: “When I was training in 2019, we had lecture sessions together.” The graduate returned in 2022 for a new dog and found that they did not have lecture sessions; the students had to go online and listen to the recordings on their own time. “I think a lot of people learn when together as a group.”

Comment: A first-time graduate spoke, stating she is unsure where to go for supplies if she needs them, if she has questions about her dog, or general information, although she has consistent communication with her RGDMI.

Response: Pat offered to personally help her get connected.

Comment: Another graduate expressed concerns over communication efforts from Guiding Eyes. He was referring to the former newsletter publications, which” contained information about admissions, training, family connections, retirements, people getting married, births, changing jobs, the dining, things that really made us feel connected, songs from graduates and so on.” He stressed the importance of continuous and improved outreach from the school and pointed out that Guiding Eyes staff were removed from the grads-only email list, which he felt stopped the flow of communication. He feels this family concern and outreach to graduates is something that can be fixed. He is troubled that some past graduates are applying and going to other schools because of the changes and “it’s easier to go to the closest school or the one that returns their admissions fastest.”

Response: Laura thanked the graduate for sharing. “Hopefully, we can get to a place that does have a better feel. We do not want to lose our graduates to other schools.”

Comment: this graduate wanted to see what training on the Guiding Eyes campus would be like with her second guide dog; her first experience was home training. The February 2024 class had four students. “I had no issues; everybody was wonderful.” She said the staff were all friendly, often asking how she and her new dog were doing and offered all kinds of good feedback. If she had any issues with her dog, she let her trainer/instructor know and they worked on it. She continues to be connected with her trainer and fellow classmates. “I just want to say that I’ve had no issues with the school.”

Response: Laura thanked her for her positive feedback and the graduate replied that she also appreciates the positive feedback she gets.

Comment: This graduate trained with her first guide dog on campus in 2013, then again in 2021. There were differences because of COVID, which was no one’s fault. “I missed sitting in the lounge getting my coffee, hearing people play musical instruments, the communal feel. I loved my training; the two-week session and four students. It was wonderful; I have no complaints.” She is bothered more by the aftermath. “I didn’t hear from anyone for maybe four months.” She has not had a home visit from her RGDMI, whoever that is, since arriving home with her dog, although, she has had wonderful telephone follow-up for behavior issues with her dog. She also misses the newsletter.

Response: Laura apologized that she needed to leave. She said, “This has been valuable hearing from all of you. Pat, I will appreciate you collecting any other feedback and sending it my way.”

Pat addressed the group, “I’m hearing where you’re at; we can work toward improvements.” He reminded graduates to send him an email with their comments or questions. “Families discuss, families have conversations, and families work on things together.”

Comment: This graduate was in class over the July 4th holiday. She did not meet many staff, most likely because of the holiday, she thought. Her classmates often spent their evenings in their rooms. Her training experience and meals were great. She looks forward to getting subscribed to the GEB graduates email list.

Comment: this long-time graduate, having trained with her first dog in 1981, is no longer working a guide dog due to health reasons. Even though she has lost touch with Guiding Eyes, she declared, “I just love Guiding eyes!”

The discussion continued, with questions focusing on admissions and training.

Q. Can you give an update on the Running Guide Program?

A. Jolene Hollister is now the manager of the Running Guide Program, working with Payden Hubbert, the Running Guide Specialist. They are recruiting volunteers that will help support them at keeping the dogs running. If the new team is doing well with their foundational guide work during their first week of training on campus, they typically will introduce running the second week. The student, their class instructor, and the Running Guide Team will meet to determine if the graduate and new dog are safe to continue running at home, or if they will need a check-in visit before that can happen. It is individualized, a case-by-case assessment. “We are doing our best to make sure people are getting a full training experience.”

Q. What is the wait time for a new dog from the Running Guide Program?

A. Typically, we do not see a significant increase in the wait-time when we add running guide dog to the equation. Factors such as a very fast walking pace and/or a city environment contribute to the initial wait-time for any applicant. Nikki reiterated that more dogs will be able to run more frequently with the addition of the volunteers to the Running Guide Program.

Q. I recently started working from home and am contemplating applying for a successor dog. I do not know if I will have enough work for a young dog. Also, I recently heard that Minnesota has two field reps (RGDMI); should I contact them, or should I wait to hear from them?

A. Nikki thanked the graduate and will make sure they connect with her. graduate teams that are routinely seen at an ACB or NFB convention will not necessarily have a home visit, although, contemplating retirement of your dog will require a more in-depth home visit.

Q. Is there a worksheet of who does what and who should be contacted when a graduate has a question?

A. No, there is not necessarily a worksheet. Graduates often contact their Regional Guide Dog Mobility Instructor, casually known as a Field Rep. Typically, this is the person that brought your dog to you for your home training. If you are not sure who your field rep is, your point of contact will always be the Client Experience Team. Their email address is: clientexperience@guidingeyes.org. Their telephone number is: 888-987-2188. If you call the Guiding Eyes main phone number, they can transfer your call to the Client Experience Team. “We will be able to trouble-shoot with you; have you connect with a GDMI to talk about specific training issues or provide info for your RGDMI to arrange for a home visit.”

Comment: “I would love to see a worksheet on the website; a telephone directory of who to call for specific experiences.”

Graduate Council members thought this was great feedback and thanked her.

Nikki concluded that she was happy to be here and glad to have the opportunity to connect with everybody. “We are in a big transition period; collecting feedback will be helpful.” Everyone is welcome to reach out to her, whether you have been in the application process and having some struggles or frustrations or just want to offer feedback, which is a valuable source for improvements. Her direct email address is: nwentz@guidingeyes.org.

Pat and Judy thanked everyone for attending and joining in on the discussion, then closed the meeting.