

SDA and Guiding Eyes

A collaborative effort to train multi-service dogs

PRESS RELEASE

Service Dogs for America and Guiding Eyes for the Blind Team up to train the first Guide/Seizure Response Dog for a North Carolina Man.

The story begins in the fall of 2005, when Kathy Zubricki of Guiding Eyes for the Blind, Inc. [Yorktown Heights, NY] contacted Service Dogs for America's [Jud, North Dakota] Executive Director Micheal Goehring. The New York based guide dog school had placed a working guide with Jeffery [Jes] Smith in 2002. After graduating high school Jes was off to college like so many other young people of his age. His trusty guide dog [Harley] by his side.

During his freshman year Jes began having seizures. After further medical examination Jes was diagnosed with epilepsy. The doctors recommended that he put his college career on hold.

Jes was heartbroken and frightened. He had been blind since age 5 and had done well in learning skills needed to make his way in a sighted world. But now to add this new disability to his life was devastating. This situation combined with side effects from medications sent Jes into a depression. He moved back home with his mother and remained close to home.

Jes and his mother [Pam] had heard about dogs trained to intervene with seizures. The two of them began investigating and contacted Guiding Eyes for the Blind; where they had gone to get Jes' fantastic guide Harley. In the early fall of 2005 Kathy Zubricki [Guiding Eyes for the Blind, Inc.] remembered attending an Assistance Dogs International program where Goehring had presented. Zubricki phoned Goehring and posed the question... could this 5 year old Labrador guide dog be cross trained to intervene with seizures?

Long story short GEB invited Goehring to evaluate the team and assess whether or not Harley would be a candidate for cross-training. Zubricki and Goehring spent 2 days evaluating the team. It was apparent that the guide skills had deteriorated due to Jes' inactivity. However, at five years of age Harley demonstrated a good aptitude for Emergency Response training.

After some thought Zubricki and Goehring decided to have GEB trainers bring Harley to the Service Dogs for America facility in Jud, N.D. The mission was two-fold. Teach GEB trainers how to add the Emergency Medical Response training to Harley's functions. Also, to get Harley started on the training itself. Both agencies wanted to conduct this as quickly as possible as Jes would be left without his guide and companion of three years.

Kathy Rooney and Graham Buck each attended training [with Harley] at the North Dakota based facility in early November of 2005. This was a wonderful experience for all involved. The GEB trainers represented more than 25 years of combined guide dog training experience. The GEB trainers were impressed with the innovation and open-minded approach that Great Plains implements at its facility.

Mr. Buck accepted responsibility for continuing the training and finishing Harley as an emergency medical response dog. Goehring would play the roll of coach and teacher. Buck and Goehring emailed one another [almost daily] to insure that any problems would be caught early on. With Buck's aptitude and Goehring's experience things progressed nearly flawlessly.

On February 5th of 2006 Goehring flew to New York to evaluate Harley's progress. Harley checked out just fine. Goehring also presented to the executive staff, board members and trainers of GEB to bring them up to speed on the endeavor.

In the early morning hours of the 7th of February Goehring and Buck flew to North Carolina to place Harley with his master. The replacement went beautifully as Buck and Goehring worked together and within their field of expertise. Perhaps the most dramatic moment came when Jes' mother Pam was overcome by tears in reaction to Harley activating the Alert-Dog™ system. It became apparent to both Goehring and Buck that through Harley it was really [hope] that they were delivering.

Update: Recently, Jes sent a letter to Mike Goehring of Great plains. In it, he states: "Harley and I are doing well. He is quite a comedian when it comes to the magic 3 words, "Show me alert." He keeps pressing the rocker switch even after the call is in progress and it cracks me up. He also does it when he's trying to initiate play... So we are doing well. I have just gotten through a beepball tournament last week. [I] was going to take summer classes, but waited a bit too late, so I'm going to take fall classes. One more thing: Because Harley has been such a wonderful dog to train, and because of the bond he and I have formed, I've become less frightened about my epilepsy, and haven't had a seizure in over a year. It's amazing what animals can do for us... especially when it comes to relieving stress and fear."