



The NEAT Podcast, Episode Five

[Podcast intro plays]

Adam

Hello, welcome to the NEAT Podcast. I am Adam Kosakowski, one of the producers and today Steve Famiglietti, the host, and I are going to share with you some interviews that we took at the ACB 2019 convention, the American Council of the Blind, where we spoke with some guide dog schools about what they do. Stay tuned.

Steve

We are here still at the ACB convention. And I have a gentleman from the Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation, which is located in Bloomfield, Connecticut, and... Welcome to our podcast!

Chris

Oh, thank you so much. My name is Chris Eastwood, and I am a trainer instructor with the Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation. Fidelco is a nonprofit guide dog organization located in Central Connecticut, just north of Hartford. And we are unique in that we exclusively breed, train and place German Shepherd guide dogs. And we also exclusively do what's called in community placements. What that means is that we take the dog out to our students and we spend between 10 and 15 days helping to assimilate the dog into the life and lifestyle of our students with their new German Shepherd guide dog.

Steve

Wow, that's awesome. I had a Fidelco dog a number of years ago and she was my first. So I'm familiar with your program and really wanted to get you guys on our podcast because I love German shepherds and [laughing] I have one of course. What regions of the country do you place dogs in?

Chris

Yeah, good question. So Fidelco actually services the entire United States and Canada. Because we travel, our model is a little bit different than some of the other guide dog schools in the country. Instead of having a campus or one centralized location for our students to come to and stay on a dormitory and learn how to use their dog and then take it home to their home environment, we're going to travel out to the students home area, stay in a hotel near their house, and work with them. Like I mentioned earlier, 10 days if you've had a Fidelco dog in the past, 12 days if you've had a dog from another

organization, and 15 days if you are a first time guide user, And because we don't have a dormitory, or centralized location for our students to come to, we're going to take the dog out to you no matter where you're located across the US and in Canada. We have teams working in northern Maine, Quebec, Florida, Texas, California, Washington, Kansas, everywhere in between. So, yeah.

Steve

That's really impressive. And I'm sure that for some people, there are many different reasons why they couldn't go to an organization where they would have to stay for, you know, a number of weeks, which would make your program better for them.

Chris

Yeah, absolutely. So our model is such that we would ask our students to take off sometime in the beginning of the placements, but by the middle and certainly towards the end of the placement, we want to get them going back into their workplace on a regular basis, because we want to leave our students in a sustainable lifestyle with the dog. Just the way that they're going to be using it after we're out of the picture.

Adam

Oh, so partway through the experience, they're encouraged to return to work or whatever. But they're still being trained...

Chris

So the instructor will accompany them to, in that situation to work, in their workplace and back. So what's unique about the way that we're operating is that it's a one on one instruction when guide dog team, one instructor and we will work with that student to help assimilate the dog into their life and lifestyle in every capacity. And that's not just walking down the sidewalk and walking around obstacles and street crossings. Of course that's involved, but it's also going to be in home and helping the dog into their existing lifestyle, out of harness with the family, their friends, visiting the people in their life that are important to them, getting them going into workplace. Establishing a routine at their workplace and everything in between.

Adam

Wow, that's awesome.

Steve

Yeah, I experienced that with my first shepherd. And it worked out really well for me. I remember having time off from work where we were doing training in my neighborhood and such. And then, I went back to work, and the trainer came with me and helped ease the dog into that change. And then gradually each day, he would spend less and less time as it appeared that the dog was acclimating, and we were adjusting to each other and such. What are the requirements for someone if they're if they want to apply to Fidelco that the requirements that you look for in individuals?

Chris

Yeah, so we're looking first and foremost, obviously, one will have to be legally blind. So that's 20 over 200 vision. And you must also be an independent traveler, meaning that you travel without the aid of another individual. And you must have had orientation and mobility training in the past, it doesn't have to be a certain time period in the past, you know, a lot of our guided users, especially folks who have had dogs from us in the past, maybe they haven't had one in training since before their first dog and they're on their second or third dog. So, you know, it doesn't have to be within a certain proximity necessarily before they get the dog. But for first time guide dog users, that's going to be an important part of it, too.

Steve

Anything that I haven't covered that you'd like to bring up? Any upcoming events or anything happening?

Chris

Sure. Well, we do have a motorcycle ride coming up. This October (2019) on our campus in Bloomfield, Connecticut, where we're located, and I also would like to put the word out that we are always looking for volunteer puppy raisers. If I could maybe just briefly cover with what that is. So just to zoom out a little bit, we breed all of our German Shepherd dogs on our campus in Bloomfield, Connecticut, and at eight weeks old, the German Shepherd puppies will go home to a volunteer puppy raiser family for the first seven months of the puppies life and the volunteer puppy raiser will attend a Saturday obedience class on the campus at Fidelco and every other Saturday for the second seven months of the dog's life. At about a year and a half old, the dog will come in for training, be evaluated and assigned to a trainer and a trainer will take the dog through the guide dog training program at the dog's own individualized rate of learning. Takes about six to nine months per dog. And each trainer has about six dogs in training at any given time. Once the dog graduates from the guide program it's about two years old, and at that time it will be matched and placed with someone who is on our accepted and waiting list.

So, one of the most important services that our volunteers provide to us is raising these German Shepherd. We can't deliver our mission without our volunteer puppy raisers. And we're always looking for folks to help get involved and raise our puppies. I know it's hard to give it back. But it's important also to remember that the big picture and the incredible service that they provide.

[Short interlude music plays before the start of a second interview with Caitlin from Guiding Eyes]

Steve

So you're a Regional Manager for puppy raising?

Caitlin

I'm a Puppy Program Regional Manager. Yep.

Steve

Okay, so can you tell our listeners a little bit about what you do for Guiding Eyes?

Caitlin

Sure. So I'm a Puppy Program Regional Manager. My job is to teach puppy class and teach our volunteers about raising a puppy, and how to prepare a young eight-week-old puppy for their future career as a guide dog. I teach weekly puppy classes and conduct different outings and activities for our volunteer puppy raisers and the future guide dog puppies to help prepare them for their job as a future guide dogs as well as how to prepare our volunteers for the different necessities that they need to help teach.

Steve

That's fascinating and exciting. And of course, I have an end result here of being raised. My own guide dog. And I always say that none of these dogs could be who they are if they weren't raised by a loving, caring group of people, having all the puppy classes, like, I just think that puppy raisers walk on water.

Adam

[Chuckles]

Caitlin

Absolutely.

Steve

I would say that, can you tell our listeners like, what are the requirements for someone if they want it to be a puppy raiser? Do you have certain requirements that people have to fulfill if they want to be a puppy raiser?

Caitlin

Yes, so they have to first fill out an application and take what we call a pre puppy placement class. In that class, they learn some of the basic requirements and policies and procedures in order to, work with Guiding Eyes and our programs. They also learned about the first two weeks with our puppy and how you, you know, kind of read some of the basic canine body language and some of our policies and why we do some of the things the way that we do. And then they have to attend weekly and bi weekly meetings for the duration, the time that they have the dog with them in their homes, as well as different quarterly evaluations with their regional manager to check in on the progress of the dog and the handler to make sure that the dog is progressing the way that we want them to throughout their time in puppy program. And just overall making sure that they're adhering to all the guidelines and the policies that we put in place for the safety and the health of the dog throughout that time.

Steve

What kinds of things does a puppy learn when it's being raised? What are some of the basic things that they learn?

Caitlin

So, some of it is basic obedience. You know, basic commands such a sit, down, heel, stay, touch, which is the basis of targeting for our dogs. But they also learn about the world and they have different opportunities to socialize. They learn about different noises, different under footings and surfaces to walk on, they learn about public access and being out in the world. How to interact with different dogs,

different animals, different people, babies and strollers. How to access public transportation, how to be out in public spaces, of course, your average pet dog is not in the grocery store and in the mall and on public transportation and in the subway. Part of what we do is teaching the dog how to learn and act appropriately in a public space. They're going to need public access when they're a working guide. So a lot of what we do is social basic socialization, and teaching the dog how to behave and act appropriately in a public space.

Steve

That's awesome. I know that not every dog becomes a guide dog. So can you tell me like what other kinds of careers your dogs might have if they have to make a change where they can't be a guide dog like from the puppy program? Does that happen that soon? Where you would know if a dog wouldn't make it into guiding and if they don't like where might they go for another job?

Caitlin

So if our dogs decide along the way, that they don't want to be a guide dog, they do sometimes have an alternate career. Sometimes it's with another organization, another service dog school to do another job or task for an individual. Sometimes it's with detection agencies to detect certain things whether it's arson, explosives, different accelerants. What else? They can be a cherished pet. For someone who is looking for a great dog that didn't have the potential to be a working dog, but, you know, has great house manners and is a really, really nice pet dog.

Adam

I did not know that, that there's a possibility to fork off into a different profession, so to speak. That's very cool.

Caitlin

Yeah. Our first priority is to get the dog into an alternate career if they don't make it as a guide dog. So if the dog is suitable for another career, our first priority is to have them in an alternate career.

So whether it's another service dog school, a detection agency, or something like that, it's unique for every dog. We want it to be the right placement for the dog, and it's what's available at that time, but placing the dog in another career is our first priority if it's a good fit for the dog. And then the dog would be offered to the public adoption list if the dog was a candidate to be a pet. And in the seldom occasion a dog could be adopted out to the raiser of the dog if the dog decided not to be a guide dog, so they have lots of different options.

Steve

That's awesome. On average, do you know like, I'm gonna kind of put you on the spot, but I'm just curious. Do you know how many puppies are like being raised at one time? On average? If it just constantly changing?

Caitlin

On average, about 420.

Steve and Adam

Oh wow.

Caitlin

That's an average.

Steve

Do you know like, do you have raisers in every state? Like ever on in the 48?

Caitlin

No, not every 48. We have raisers as North as Maine, and as West as Ohio, as South as Virginia and North Carolina. I had to think about the map there. [Chuckles]

Adam

I was thinking about it too!

Steve

[Laughs]

Caitlin

So like Maine to Virginia, and then out to Ohio.

Adam

What do you think Steve?

Steve

It's a huge commitment for sure to raise a puppy, I couldn't do it.

Caitlin

It's not for everybody, and it's certainly a commitment but a very rewarding one.

Adam

[While podcast outro plays]

For more information or to subscribe to our newsletter, please visit us at AssistiveTechnology.OakHillCT.org or hit us up on Twitter, @TheNEATPodcast. Today's podcast was hosted by Steve Famiglietti and produced by Kris Thompson and Adam Kosakowski. Our theme music was composed by Andrew Pergiovanni. Tune in next month for another episode and thanks for listening!