

Constant Companion

Guide dog leads Kingsport woman to greater independence

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Two days after arriving at The Seeing Eye Inc. in Morristown, N.J., in April 2010, Patty Fletcher met her match — a beautiful 2-year-old black Labrador retriever named Campbell. The bond was instant.

Today, Campbell is 3, and they are back home in Kingsport. It's Campbell's job to help Fletcher navigate through her day, whether it's catching public transportation to and from her job with Contact-Concern of Northeast Tennessee, grocery shopping or just strolling through her neighborhood.

For 31 years, Fletcher walked with a cane, which wasn't particularly helpful in navigating crowded situations. When she fell behind trying to keep up with a friend using a guide dog in a busy mall, she decided it was time to get her own dog.

Fletcher was born prematurely and placed in an incubator. She was given too much oxygen, which scarred her retinas. She briefly attended elementary school in Kingsport before enrolling in the Tennessee School for the Blind in Nashville for fifth and sixth grades. She returned to Kingsport and spent seventh and eighth grades at Ketron Middle School before returning to Nashville to start her ninth grade year. Though she didn't graduate, she did earn a GED. Until 1991, she had some vision in her right eye, but she was already moving toward reading Braille.

She held various jobs from the time she was 17. In 2010, she was hired as the volunteer coordinator for Contact-Concern, where she works 20 hours a week.

Since she uses public transportation regularly, she warned the drivers and the other regular riders that she would be gone for awhile, then return with a guide dog.

Since being established in 1929, The Seeing Eye has provided more than 15,000 specially-bred and trained dogs to guide people who are blind. The Seeing Eye, the oldest existing dog guide school in the world, is a philanthropy supported by contributions from individuals, corporations and foundations, bequests and other planned gifts.

Once Fletcher applied to and was accepted to the school, she was there for four weeks of training. The only charge to her was \$150 to cover the cost of the dog and its initial equipment, her instruction with the dog, room and board, transportation to and from the school and lifetime follow-up services.

Students arrive on a Monday and spend the first few days getting acquainted with the surroundings and their instructors. They first meet their dogs on Wednesday afternoon, but the match is much earlier.

"When Patty came to train, there was a team of five instructors and we have a pool of roughly 40 dogs ready to match up to the group of about 20 students that were going to be in our class," explained Drew Gibbon, a senior instructor who has been with The Seeing Eye nearly 30 years. "All of the members of the instructors team did a lot of talking among ourselves ... so we all know the 40 dogs pretty well before the person comes into the class to train with us. We will get good information about the person ahead of time on paper as well as references, as well as the [home] visit by an instructor during the application process."

During the home visit, instructors get a good idea of how the person walks, what kind of balance they have, their abilities, and they get a feel for what kind of dog

would be a good match, Gibbon said.

"One of the first things we look at in the matching is the speed the person likes to walk, and how firm the pull by the dog the person likes. Some dogs will pull very quickly, some will pull very gently."

Gibbon said the student and dog almost always get along, but occasionally the match doesn't work. "Usually we get a sense very quickly and we can talk with the person and tell them we don't think it's going to be a happy match-up. We tell them, 'Don't blame yourself. It's our fault.' ... We take the blame and we switch and give them a different dog."

Days begin at 5:30 a.m., with breakfast at 7 a.m., lunch at 12:15 p.m., and dinner at 5:15 p.m. Each student goes on two trips per day — one in the morning, one in the afternoon. There is time in between trips for laundry, relaxing and socializing. Lectures take place after dinner. Instruction begins with short, simple routes in downtown Morristown, progressing to longer, more varied routes. In the last week of class, students have an opportunity to visit New York City.

"You don't learn it all when you're there. You come home and learn," Fletcher said. "They teach you the basic

Please see ADA, PAGE 2C



Campbell, a 3-year-old black Labrador retriever, helps Patty Fletcher navigate through her day. Campbell and Fletcher were matched through the New Jersey-based The Seeing Eye, the oldest existing dog guide school in the world.

Photos by
Ned Jilton II



Continued from page 1C
fundamentals but you have to fine tune it, work with your dog."

Once students leave The Seeing Eye, they are the full owners of their dogs. Campbell can be expected to work seven to eight years. He stays by Fletcher's side always, whether she's relaxing or working. He's not trained as a guard dog, but Fletcher believes he would act to protect her if the need arose.

When students leave The Seeing Eye campus, it's important for instructors to know they will be safe, Gibbons said.

"Just about equal importance is that the person really loves the dog and communicates that fondness to the dog, makes the dog feel happy and contented in their lives," he said. "The dogs don't make this choice. We choose for them to be working dogs and we want to make sure we provide a very happy, satisfying life for the dog. Some people are able to express and give out love more readily than other people, and Patty is good at that and she fully understands what Campbell has been through and always thinks about it from Campbell's point of view."

The Americans with Disabilities Act and laws in all 50 states and the provinces of Canada guarantee access to public places to blind people accompanied by Seeing Eye dogs. Still, Fletcher and Campbell have been met with resistance.

"I've had people refuse to ride the bus because there was a dog on the bus," she said. And one Bristol restaurant was hesitant to admit Campbell.

Fletcher carries business cards, a law book and a Seeing Eye school identification card to help explain her situation to others. She also carries a backpack with supplies for Campbell — a towel and wipes to clean him, and dog food if they're out when its time for his meal.

Though Campbell is well-trained and well-behaved, he's still a youngster and he can be distracted.

"He wants to sniff people and I have to correct that a lot," Fletcher said. "And it's challenging in the grocery store because he wants to see in the meat counter."

Fletcher is very familiar with her community, and she directs Campbell using simple commands like "forward," "right" and "left." At a street crossing, she relies on sound to determine whether its safe to step off the curb, but Campbell is trained in "intelligent disobedience," in other words, not obeying the command to cross if he feels it is unsafe.

Fletcher said the difference between cane travel and guide dog travel is like night and day and she'll now walk in crowds like those during Fun Fest.

One of her biggest challenges is public interference. "I can be out walking and people will reach out and touch him before I even know they're there. If they touch him while he's working, our connection is broken," she said.

According to The Seeing Eye, when someone takes hold of a blind person's arm or the dog's harness, or otherwise distracts either the dog or its owner, it's like grabbing the steering wheel of a car

away from its driver.

The Seeing Eye offers these suggestions to the public should they encounter a Seeing Eye dog:

- Don't let your pet near a guide dog, even if your dog is leashed

- Always let a person who is blind know that you are nearby and tell them if you have a dog with you

- Do not call the dog's name, make eye contact or talk to the dog. It's always best to treat the dog as if he is not there

- Do not shout directions, take the person by the arm or interrupt them when they are crossing the street. If you are concerned for their safety, ask them if they need help first

Admitting it's not for the weak at heart, Fletcher believes if you are physically able to get out, walk and

work, a Seeing Eye dog should be considered.

"There's a lot of maintenance that goes on. But it's worth it," she said.

The Seeing Eye has found that candidates with certain characteristics are more likely to succeed as dog guide handlers. These include people with the physical, mental and emotional capability of handling the stress of training with a Seeing Eye; those who are motivated and emotionally stable; those who are capable of walking one to two miles a day; those able to receive and implement instruction; those with sufficient hearing ability; those with independent travel skills; and those with the necessary maturity and temperament to handle the responsibilities of caring

for a Seeing Eye dog.

For more information on The Seeing Eye, visit www.SeeingEye.org, call (973) 539-4425 or send email info@seeingeye.org.