

Between Dogs

Deni Elliott, May 2016

Imagine growing into the perfect relationship. Cheek to cheek, shoulder to shoulder, you grow so close that it feels like you two are puzzle pieces, interlocking to complete one another. The harness buckled makes you one. That's how it is feels to be in the perfect guide dog team.

Separation is unimaginable. And then unavoidable. A guide dog with an eye tumor. Ironic and unlikely.

I am a better person today because of three years with Guiding Eyes Alberta at my side. I am brave now. I hate pulling out my white cane now to find rather than avoid obstacles as I did with Alberta, but I still anticipate international travel and the mile-long walks to my office.

I think that Alberta is also better because of me. I trust that she will not forget what she gained from our years together that helped her grow both inside and outside of the guide dog role. She completed her Rally Advanced Excellent title and was one qualifying show away from completing her Novice Obedience title. With me, Alberta learned to ride a paddleboard and touch noses with dolphins who surfaced to see what that dog was doing on a board in the bay. She learned enough off-list commands and destination words that her comprehensive vocabulary was well over 300 words. I called her my furry GPS.

Alberta's work included calmly stretching out and crossing her front legs next to me on stage, surveying audiences of more than 1000 people and offering cold nose solace to a single weeping client in my office. She guided me through rain storms and past snakes on the sidewalk. She guided me on cliff-side trails and through commercial construction sites. She learned to endure 12 hours of airplane cancellations with meager relief possibilities, but often refused to use the pee-pad-on-the-floor service dog relief areas that some airports offered.

Alberta graced the Bayboro Blonde Ale beer label on the brew 3-Daughters Brewery produced for the USF St. Petersburg 50th-Anniversary. When asked why she was not wearing her harness on the label the beer, I said that we didn't want anyone to think that she was drinking on the job.

On the label, instead of her harness, Alberta wore the huge smile that she wears anytime that a camera is pointed in her direction. How does she know to smile for the camera? Who knows? Dogs are not supposed to have 2-dimensional understanding, but Alberta makes eye contact with people in mirrors and will respond to their reflected hand commands. To sit. To down. To woof.

Alberta is a miracle created through Guiding Eyes for the Blind's genetics, breeding, early training, and the perfect puppy raising home. She had all that a dog could ask for in her advanced training. When we met, she was ready to give me everything she had. I was willing to give her everything right back. Guiding Eyes training staff knew that we were meant for one another long before I arrived on campus. As we each continued to give our best, we each grew as partners and as individuals since that March, 2013 meeting.

Alberta's eye tumor, diagnosed days before her 5th birthday, a doctor told me, meant that Alberta lost the genetic lottery. I disagree.

Alberta has had her right eye removed and has learned how to navigate as a one-eyed dog. She will never again guide me. But, she has an exciting and active early retirement ahead of her. Some of us who have lost vision in both eyes wish that we could say the same!

I do not know the cosmic plan that brings entities into relationship and separates them again. Despite my grief, I celebrate where I find myself today.

In the short time since Alberta and I diverged into individual journeys, I feel myself spreading out to fill the space that Alberta occupied. I can tell that I am bigger now than the person I was before Alberta came into my life.

I am lonely. I need a guide dog at my side. I miss Alberta every day. But, I have more to bring to a new canine partner because Alberta was here first.

For Tampa Bay Times coverage of Alberta's retirement party, go to <http://www.tampabay.com/features/community-gathers-to-thank-alberta-the-yellow-lab-who-served-them-all/2276541>

For Tampa Bay Times coverage of me meeting Alberta go to <http://www.tampabay.com/features/humaninterest/guide-dog-leads-vision-challenged-professor-to-new-insight/2145205>.

For WTSP coverage of Alberta becoming the Bayboro Blonde Ale model, go to <http://3dbrewing.com/most-popular-blonde-on-usf-campus-is-dog-with-her-own-beer> and click on the photo to access video.