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Loving and Letting Go

Thinking Dog Blog Guest Column by Deni Elliott

Sometimes, things don't work out. Looking back, it is easy to say that I should have known earlier. We had different needs. He is intensely athletic; I'm a stroll-on-the-beach kind of gal. He always wanted to be in charge; I think that responsibility should be shared. He likes hanging out with the guys and he unabashedly flirts with the girls; I wanted a less social life and begged him to have eyes only for me. After three years of trying to make it work and a year of carefully planning our separation, I'm ready to swallow hard and announce it to the world. I love him more than I can say. He's smarter than I am and generally well-intended.

Wylie and I are breaking up.

It might be difficult for some people that I compare finding a career change for my guide dog with getting a divorce. The relationship between human partner and guide dog partner is 24/7. The partnership is a dance of inter-dependency. Wylie is dependent upon me to give him what he needs and he is not shy about communicating his demands. I place my life in his paws. I trust him to guide me under low hanging branches, to steer me around obstacles in our path, and to take us across streets safely, avoiding the traffic that I can hear but am unlikely to see. We communicate moods and expectations up and down the harness just as we let each other know what is next in our physical progression. Unless the canine and human members of the team have similar temperaments and working styles, the clashes can be frustrating for both.

Wylie is the second guide dog that I have raised from young puppyhood, enlisting the expertise of professional trainers to accomplish what I couldn't do on my own. As with my first guide dog, Wylie was a puppy with strong potential to be a guide. After two years of financial and emotional investment that included buying, growing, and training the puppy, I had an overwhelming motivation to make the relationship work. That wasn't enough.

In January, Wylie will leave me for good and train to be a service dog for a veteran with PTSD. For the first time in 12 years, I will be without a guide dog. Two months later, I will join a 2-week accelerated training class at *Guiding Eyes for the Blind* in Yorktown, New York. When I return home, I expect to have a 2-year-old mellow yellow Labrador Retriever at my side. By then, I hope that Wylie will also be matched with his new partner. He'll be bonding with a veteran who needs a dog to take him from a darker place than I have ever experienced.

When Wylie goes to Columbia, South Carolina for service dog training, he will live first at PAALS, a Service Dog Training School. Wylie and other dogs in training will go one evening each week to Fort Jackson to work with active-duty service members and veterans who are coping with combat related anxiety. The dogs learn to work appropriately around people with PTSD; the service members and veteran volunteers learn how to teach the dogs cues so that they can help others like themselves. Dogs and soldiers in this intense program begin to support one another. When the time and match is right, Wylie will meet his new partner, most

likely starting out as an “intensive companion” dog for a veteran who is not yet ready for the challenge of working with a service dog out in the community. Dog and veteran will be encircled by a team of professionals to support their journey together.

This will be a life for Wylie different from guiding me around obstacles that I can’t see. This will be a life that better matches his nature. The behaviors that he will be trained to respond to on cue include resting his head on his partner’s knee, laying on his partner’s feet, and providing a friendly but safe barrier between his partner and others. With me, Wylie got to spend time connecting with me like this only after the harness came off and he was done guiding for the day. Providing this kind of support for someone is Wylie’s dream job. As the veteran is likely to be no more than 30 years old, Wylie’s new partner will be able to provide the daily intensive exercise this dog craves.

Wylie will no longer have to endure long hours laying at my feet while I work in the office or teach my classes. He will no longer sigh and resign himself to being “on duty” when I command him sternly to guide me to the Dean’s office when he wants to walk us home and be done for the day. Wylie will no longer have to pant and tremble as he struggles to guide me through the airports and on to the airplanes that he finds so extremely stressful. Wylie will finally have the life he was meant to have.

I will get past my grief over losing the goofy frat-boy I have known for six years. I’ll get past feeling that I failed Wylie. I’ll have a guide dog bred and trained by professionals who know how to create ethical working dog relationships. I will have learned a lesson in loving and letting go.