

Another opportunity to laugh together

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By Guiding Eyes

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by Guiding Eyes graduate Deni Elliott

“Are you ready?” I whispered to Alberta an early Saturday morning in July.

She thumped her tail. Pressed her shoulder hard against my left leg.

Ready.

I fingered the leash loop in my left hand. Feather touched the shoulder of my sighted guide with my right hand. Took a deep breath.

Ready.

Guiding Eyes Alberta and I stepped out.

Not into the obstacles of life in harness, but on loose lead to the first of 14 Rally Novice stations that criss-crossed a mat-covered 50' x 60' ring. Each 8 ½ x 11" sign at each station gave a visual direction or obedience command.

“Right turn,”

“Call dog front. Finish right. Halt.”

“Fast.”

“Figure Eight.”

“Sit. Down. Walk around dog.”

The judge had laid out the pattern of stations in the hour before the competition began. Competitors had 10 minutes to walk the course and plan their strategy. Then, a team at a time, dog and handler concentrated on doing each task just right and moving quickly on to the next. All teams completing the stations would be one step closer to their Rally Novice titles. The fastest team to do it right wins.



This was our first attempt. I was nervous. Alberta jumped for joy.

Jan Erickson, my sighted guide, positioned herself so that she could keep pace with us and watch our progress. She called out signs to me the instant that I needed to give Alberta direction. Jan waited. She rushed. She crossed in front. In back. She needed to guide, but keep out of the way. She also could not block the judge's view of what Alberta and I were doing. For the minute and 35 seconds that Alberta and I worked the course, Jan choreographed our movements.

Other dog enthusiasts gathered, hushed and watched. They had never seen a blind person and guide dog attempt a Rally course. They had never seen such a dance with handler, dog and sighted guide.

Yet, this was no miracle. Getting to this point seemed remarkably easy in retrospect.

When I met Alberta in March, I marveled at her compact intensity and speed and wondered what she might like to do for fun. Rally seemed a good fit for us; the sport stresses teamwork with handler talking to the dog throughout practices and competition. I remembered Rally sequences from the days back when I could see the course.

Attending a class in an indoor ring, under the guidance of an instructor, meant that Alberta and I could concentrate on having fun together. Alberta could be free from her responsibility for my safety.

I cleared my plan with Guiding Eyes and contacted the American Kennel Club to get Alberta's Purebred Alternative Listing (PAL) number and to see what kind of accommodation AKC had worked out for blind handlers. I knew I would need a set of functional human eyes. I couldn't see the course, read the signs, or find the cones that we were asked to weave or spiral or circle around.

AKC accommodations' letter allowed a sighted guide to accompany me in the ring, read the signs and alert me to the location of cones. Within two months of our trip home from Guiding Eyes, Alberta and I were attending Rally Training at The Dog Training Club of Saint Petersburg.

Liz Piquet, the creative and enthusiastic Rally instructor walked me through our early training sessions, alerting me to signs and to obstacles. Then club member and veteran Rally competitor, Jan Erickson, volunteered to be my sighted guide for class and competitions. Jan and her Shetland Sheep Dog, Cody, had completed their Rally Advanced Excellent title, the most advanced title possible in Rally competition.



Jan and I walked the patterns first without Alberta. She and I developed cues and strategy so that I could work the course as well as sighted handlers who could see two and three signs ahead. Jan coached, "Jog to your right here." "Turn left as soon as I call out the fourth cone." "I'm going to run up ahead at this point. Focus on my voice and keep the right distance from me." I memorized the toughest direction changes, reaching fingertips to Jan's shoulder when I couldn't process audibly how to move efficiently to the next station.

Led into the ring, Alberta cocked her head at both Jan and me. The commands weren't confusing. "Sit." "Down." "Fast." "Slow." "Walk around cones without knocking them over." Alberta knew all that from guide dog training. "Come Front," "Left about," "Spiral," were new to her but easy to learn. But she seemed to want to figure out how all of this connected with guiding her person from Point A to Point B.

Then Alberta got it. Rally was fun. Not work. It was a game just for her. It was Jan's job to keep me safe in the ring.

When Alberta understood that Rally let her be silly, she made the most of the opportunity. She spun in the air when asked to move from "Front" to "Heel." She hopped up to touch my elbow as we did "About Turn." She stag leaped on the "Fast." She gave me a hug and a kiss after we crossed the finish line. Her tail never stopped wagging. She was clearly enjoying this.

A few months later, we were ready. It was show time.

I reminded myself that we didn't need to be the best. If I did what Jan said, at the exact moment that she said, gave Alberta the right guidance, and trusted Alberta to do as I asked, no matter how silly she found the request, the three of us might finish the course without

tripping over signs or running into walls. We might successfully finish one of the three qualifying runs required for the Rally Novice title.

The first day of competition, Alberta and I finished first out of seven teams with a perfect score of 100 points. The second day, we qualified, but lost 16 points.

“Back up and call your dog.”

“One step back. Halt.”

“Two steps back. Halt.”

“Three steps back. Halt.”

Jan and Alberta performed flawlessly. Me, not so much. Who knew that walking backwards and calling a dog front would make it impossible for me to count to three?

Our third trial and the last required for Alberta’s Rally Novice title came a month later with another first place and another perfect score of 100. Alberta and I found our sport.

Before I was matched with Alberta, Guiding Eyes staff asked me what kind of dog I wanted. I didn’t specify color, breed or sex. “I want a dog with a sense of humor,” I said. And that’s what I got. Rally gives Alberta and me one more opportunity to laugh together.