

Between Dogs

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By Guiding Eyes

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Imagine growing into the perfect relationship. Cheek to cheek, shoulder to shoulder, you grow so close to your partner 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.

When you need to separate because of age or illness on either side, both of you leave the relationship feeling incomplete. Ripped apart, canine and human still take forward strength built from time together.

I am a better person today because of more than three years with Guiding Eyes Alberta at my side. I am brave now.

I am eager for international travel and anticipate the mile-long walks to and from my office. I hate pulling out my white cane now to find rather than avoid obstacles as I did with Alberta, but I have not lost the sense of self that I gained through her.

I think that Alberta is also better because of me. I trust that she will not forget what she gained from our years together. 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 that 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 ranged from being on stage with me before an audience of more than 1000 people to offering cold nose solace to a single weeping client in my office. She learned to endure 12 hours of airplane cancellations with no relief possibilities, but had enough dignity to refuse to go in the ADA-required but totally inappropriate service dog relief areas that some airports sort of offered.

Alberta got her own beer label. She is the Bayboro Blonde for the USF St. Petersburg 50th-Anniversary Bayboro Blonde Ale. When asked why she was not wearing her harness in the cover photo that graced the beer, the koozies, the taps, I said that we didn't want anyone to think that she was drinking on the job.

On the label, 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. Down. Woof.

Alberta is a miracle created through Guiding Eyes 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 too. Guiding Eyes training staff knew that we were meant for one another long before I arrived on campus.

Her cancer, diagnosed days before her 5th birthday, a doctor told me, meant that Alberta lost the genetic lottery.

But, maybe not. She has an exciting active early retirement ahead of her.

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

In the 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. But, I have more to bring that new partner because Alberta was here first.