

Last Night Alone

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A guest post by Deni Elliott

Tonight is my last night alone. After four months of crawling into bed without Guiding Eyes Alberta snorting and snoring a few feet away, tonight is my last night alone. Tomorrow I meet Guiding Eyes Koala. As hard as I've squinted at photos and video and as tightly as I have clutched each new piece of information, I find it odd how little I can imagine about our future together.

Koala's passed all the tests and has exceeded expectations. I've heard that she leaps into her harness and back-channels routes after only one trip. She eagerly solves problems and pivots on a dime, ready for new adventure. A personality match for sure. But I remind myself that I need to go slow and not expect too much of this 2-year-old.

At the cusp of this unknown relationship curving to be real, my tummy flutters with butterflies of anxiety and anticipation. I can imagine the home trainer better than the dog he is bringing me.

Jim Gardner, GEB director of home training, will fly from New York to Tampa with Koala curled at his feet. I imagine Jim cheerfully answering the questions I am annoyed to be asked. "Are you training that dog?" someone will ask. "Yes," he'll smile, "This is a new, young guide dog. I am taking her to meet her blind partner." When asked, I put on the same "please the public"

smile, but say in a way that invites no further intrusion: “Every day is a training day, but I am blind, and she is my guide dog.”

I imagine Jim calmly replying, when asked the dog’s name, “We don’t tell people that because we don’t want them distracted.” Knowing that despite 16 years of guide dog use that I am still paralyzed by strangers asking my dog’s names, other trainers have had me practice giving a fake name. I don’t lie well. Saying, “I won’t tell you,” feels rude. “Leave us alone,” is definitely rude. Saying, “If I tell you the dog’s name, you will immediately say it and distract her and that is exactly what I don’t want you to do,” is too long and complicated. So, I quickly say, “This is the dog’s name, BUT DON’T SAY IT.” As those words come out of my mouth, I concurrently offer a treat so that the dog doesn’t pay attention to what the other person might say. We then hurry away.

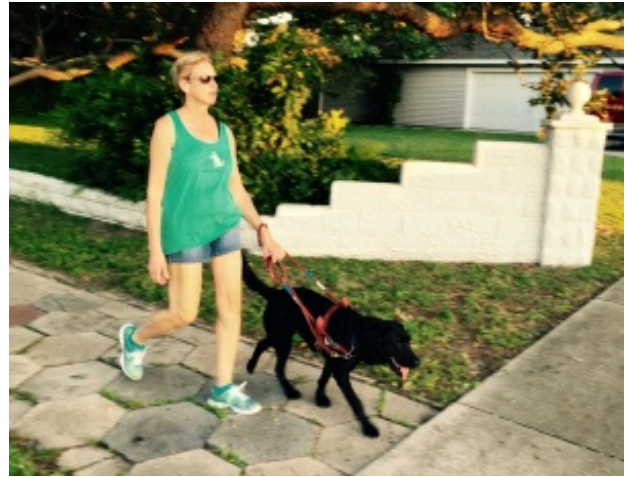
I imagine Jim chaperoning Koala and me on our first neighborhood walk. “What can we do for our first outing?” I will ask. “Two miles? One mile? 250 steps?” I have three routes mapped out just in case. For the months I’ve caned my way through twice-daily walks, I’ve imagined being guided by new dog instead. I whisper “Right-right,” and “To the curb please,” and “Good dog, good job.” I’ve counted the number of streets I cross on these daily laps so that I can help Koala learn streets where she needs to stop and driveways where she doesn’t. I imagine the neighbors that I pass daily expressing surprise and sending best wishes when they see me with Koala in harness instead of gripping a cane.

I cry when I imagine Jim and Koala arriving from the airport tomorrow night. I have joked about lighting candles and pouring wine for the new girl’s arrival. In truth, I have stocked the house with beds, toys, crate, food and treats. I ache with the knowledge that none of these will fill her heart tomorrow night. All I can do is make promises that she won’t understand.

She’ll wonder where her most recent caregivers, Graham and David, have gone. She’ll look for her special canine friend, Wrangler. Some visual or scent will call to mind her puppy raiser mom, Eileen, although it has been six months since they’ve seen one another. From Alberta, I know that well-raised guide dogs never forget previous family members and greet them with great joy. I suspect Koala would prefer we all live together in one pack. I can’t make that happen, but I will promise to keep her connected with the dogs and humans who matter to her most.

I will promise to keep her safe. I hope that she never needs to know that I will instinctively fold her under my body for protection if anything threatens her just as I did when Alberta and I were attacked by a stray dog.

I will promise to trust her today and for all of the tomorrows we have together. When I am utterly confused, I will follow her lead, knowing that she'll have better ideas than I about what to do next.



I can't imagine Koala at my side because I don't know yet the person she will turn out to be. But I can promise to show her day after day that I will love her for being her own best self and for who we can become together. Maybe that's enough for the first day.

Postscript: Koala and Deni are off to a great start!