

Not Meant to Be

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Pam Hogle

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A guest post by Deni Elliott

The partnership that develops between a well-bred and trained guide dog and a visually impaired human looks and feels like magic. However, as was the case with Ida and me, sometimes things just don't work out.

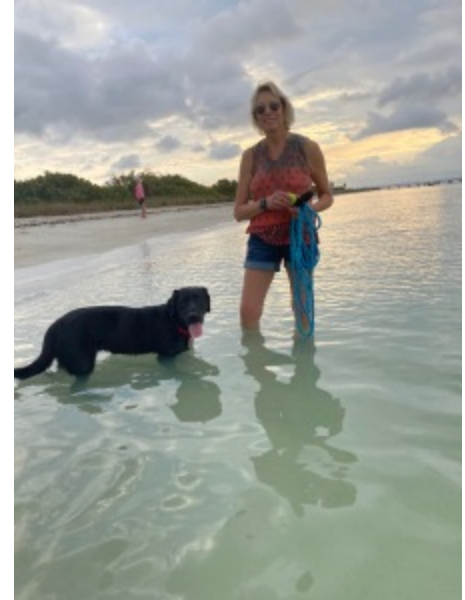
Alberta, my first Guiding Eyes dog, and her successor, Koala, matched me perfectly in very different ways. I wasn't surprised that Ida was not like the others; I thought of her as my sensitive girl.

However, after three weeks with me, Ida made it clear to my Guiding Eyes home trainer and me that she really didn't want to be a guide dog. I am grateful that Ida made her choice before we set out together on a trip in which she would have needed be comfortable at my side while I gave a professional presentation in Chicago, attended some meetings in Salt Lake City, and then got to know her golden retriever sister and life in Montana, with many hours in airports and flights on Delta in between.

Ida got the life that I suspect she wanted all along — being a pampered pet with the family who raised her from the age of 8 weeks to 16 months. My previous two guides are happy too: when Koala retired after more than 6 years of guiding, she happily returned to her puppy raiser. Alberta, who retired early due to an eye tumor, is now 12 years old. She lovingly watches over my toddler grandniece, who has shared food with the dog since she was old enough to fling it from her high chair.

I will be fine, even though I miss having a dog at my side and am temporarily using a white cane to help with navigation. Guiding Eyes training staff and placement specialists have come to know me well over the past 10 years; They are working hard to find my next perfect match.

My first two Guiding Eyes partners taught me that dogs with different temperaments can be equally good guides:



Ida's first visit to the dog beach

- Alberta exuded confidence. Give her a challenge, and she'd rise up on her toes to say, "Bring it on!" More than once she responded to my uncertainty by nuzzling me to say, "We can do this."
- Koala was my introvert, analytical and thoughtful about new environments, but five weeks into our relationship, she flew with Pam and me to Israel without complaint and happily worked trains and open air markets in Jerusalem, as well as guiding me safely up and down the centuries-old stairs that traverse Tzefat.

Ida was brisk, responsive, and responsible when in harness and loved being praised and rewarded for her good work. That's why she was matched with me in the first place! But, when off duty, she increasingly startled at unexpected sounds and sights, including wind in the trees and birds flying overhead. Within a few weeks, she could no longer shake off whatever surprised her and became more intensely anxious more of the time. Ida taught me that a smart, creative dog can hide her true feelings in her eagerness to please — at least for a while.

A successful guide partnership is a tapestry of collaboration, cooperation, communication, and trust. My dog trusts me to know our ultimate destination and give her clear directions about where we are heading. I trust the dog to alert me so that I can navigate curbs and stairs and locate door handles and empty chairs. She steers us safely around obstacles that I would run into or trip over. Most importantly, she quickly gets us out of the way of vehicles that might run us down. The partnership works only when dog and person agree that the dog has final say in all guiding decisions. We live by the Guiding Eyes mantra: Trust your dog.

Sometimes puppies decide as early as 8 weeks that they are not cut out for the intensity of guide work; others make their reluctance clear as adolescents when learning guiding skills. Dogs past their prime slow down when they are in harness, signaling to their partners that they are ready to retire. Unfortunately, as with Ida, sometimes the dog's decision comes at a sad time for all of the humans involved: When placed in a real life partnership, they decide that a guide dog's life is not for them.