

Edition 43 | November 2020

visionary

vi•sion•ar•y (vizh'n-eri || -erri) adj. 1. Characterised by vision or foresight



John Byfield
A Lifetime Of Service



Expanding Research
At Guide Dogs UK
A Focus On Human Behavioural Sciences

First and foremost, membership of the IGDF enables Guide Dog Schools around the world to join a community dedicated to serving the visually impaired. That community needs and wants to share its knowledge and the IGDF facilitates that.

The map below outlines the contributing countries for this edition of Visionary.



Cover Photo:

Front cover picture - Cute puppies having fun with a food bowl.

Flags displayed for this edition are:

Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Israel, UK, USA, Russia

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Message from the Chair

Bill Thornton - Chief Executive Officer
BC & Alberta Guide Dogs, Canada

Greetings IGDF Friends,

This is the first edition of Visionary since our recent AGM and as your newly minted Chair, I would like to thank our immediate past Chair, Paul Metcalf for his eight years of outstanding service to the IGDF. Paul served as Chair for the last four years. He has left the organization in great shape and has set the bar high for my tenure. Many thanks to Paul and we all look forward to working with him as he continues to volunteer for the IGDF as Chair of the ISO process. My congratulations to Karen Hayes on her election to the Board. Karen's strong corporate background and service in the not-for-profit sector will serve us all well. Lastly, once again my thanks to the members that stood for election, giving us a healthy competitive election process. You are our IGDF stars of the future – thank you.

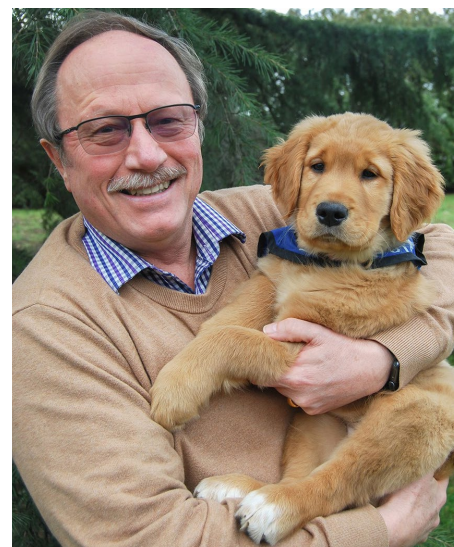
The Board has agreed unanimously to establish a new Education Committee, which will be Co-Chaired by Christine Baroni-Pretsch and Tim Stafford. Our Co-Chairs are in the process of completing the terms of reference and recruiting committee members, and we will keep you informed of progress. The goal is to broaden education opportunities for our members, first through technical education of GDMIs and Guide Dog Trainers. This will all tie in with ISO down the road. We will host a webinar in due course to keep everyone informed. This is an exciting venture which will add value to membership.

The Board has started developing a new IGDF Strategic Plan and Karen Hayes is leading the project, supported by Tim Stafford. We have engaged consultants to take us through the process. We are starting with the Board and then plan to have a membership survey in mid-January.

The ISO (International Organization for Standardization) project committee

has just completed the first phase in the project. Under the guidance of NEN, (The Royal Netherlands Standardization Institute), the committee has completed ISO Form 1. Essentially, this is the application to start the process of creating a new international standard. Our application will be reviewed by the ISO reviewing committee in Geneva. If approved, the application will then be sent to the 187 ISO member countries to be voted on. If the vote succeeds, then we start the process of establishing standards. The whole process will take 3-4 years. There will be a standards committee, various working groups (6-8) and mirror committees in as many countries as possible that have a Guide Dog Program. There needs to be a minimum of 8 national mirror committees. Early in 2021 we will host a webinar explaining the ISO process, content and advantages of ISO Standards to our members.

As you can see, the Board and committees, are running at full steam and we have a very large volume of work ahead of us. I would like to thank, David Maynard, our quarterback in the UK Office, my colleagues on the Board and the huge number of members that volunteer on our committees and working groups. The pay is zero, the hours are long, however, the rewards



New IGDF Chair, Bill Thornton showing off a cute fluffy puppy.

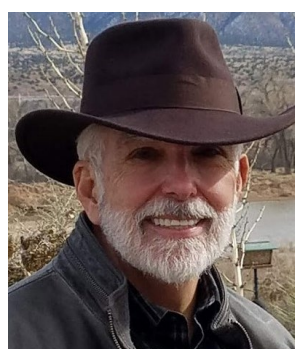
are endless and in the words of Winston Churchill, "We make a living from what we get – We make a life by what we give" – thank you all.

In these COVID-19 times, I wish you all good health and may your organizations continue to prosper and grow.

Bill Thornton
IGDF Chair



Vice-Chair: Christine Turc
France



Treasurer: Wells Jones
USA



Christine Baroni-Pretsch
Switzerland



Karen Hayes
Australia



Kazumasa Oda
Japan



Tim Stafford
United Kingdom

Disclaimer

Whilst the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF) retains editorial right to all articles presented within the Visionary, accuracy of specific detail and figures quoted are as provided by the author and their supporting organisation.

The IGDF, whilst welcoming feedback on content, will not enter into any dialogue relating to perceived inaccuracies in these areas.

IGDF Assessments

Due to the continuing restrictions on international travel, assessment visits are still suspended. There are therefore no new members or assessments to report. The Accreditation Committee (AC) is currently working on proposals to make increased use of technology in assessments, so that these can resume as soon as possible.

Several applications for IGDF membership have been received in recent months, which is very encouraging in these challenging times. The Board and AC will prioritise scheduling assessments for these organisations once assessments resume.

The AC has also been working to revise the IGDF Standards, and will circulate the proposed new Standards to all members. AC Chair Susan Armstrong will also present the new Standards during a Webinar. There will then be a period of consultation, during which members can comment on the new draft. These comments will then be considered by the AC and Board and a new Standards document will be published.

Our best wishes go to the following organisation which has left the IGDF:

- Malta Guide Dogs Foundation (Malta)

Tribute To A Visionary

We are saddened by the death of Norman Leventhal, Co-Founder of Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind, on February 23, 2020, at the age of 90.

Born in Utica, New York, USA, Norman was later recruited into the Army's Special Weapons Development Program. Following military service, he earned a degree from Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. That led to a job at General Electric. He was also a businessperson, turning a modest family business, a motor lodge and restaurant, into a neighbourhood landmark. He was involved with charities, and even dived into municipal politics.

A diplomat from the Israeli consulate in New York introduced Noach Braun, CEO & Co-Founder of Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind, to Leventhal in 1986. Braun's pipe dream was to open a guide dog training center to aid Israel's blind population. Braun had almost given up his dream before meeting Leventhal. "It all succeeded because Norman worked very, very hard to get the guide dog schools in America to open the door for me", says Braun, who wasn't getting much support from the Israeli government and travelled to the United States to learn guide dog training. This was before the establishment of the IGDF.

An amazing part of Leventhal's legacy is that he had no connection to the world of the blind or even of dogs prior to 1986. Braun says, "What Norman had was the stubborn determination to break down barriers. The word 'no' was not in his lexicon. Norman believed that everything is possible. Norman wasn't just a dreamer. He was a visionary."

Jane Thornton, C.O.O. and Co-Founder of Canadian Guide Dogs for the Blind, and a past Chair of the IGDF says, "Norman was such a nice man. He talked to everyone at the seminars, was always smiling and kind, and will be remembered by many as the man who always had a camera and took many photos, eager to share them with everyone. Many in our industry will miss him very much."

Braun adds, "He (Norman) was kind, gracious, giving, and but most of all loving. His charm could break down barriers. His smile and laughter could light up the darkest rooms. And his boldness would achieve results."

Leventhal had a major influence on the guide dog industry. He left us with his legacy at the Israel Guide Dog Center and his inspiration everywhere else.



Norman having cuddles with a litter of puppies

John Byfield: A Lifetime Of Service

When asked about hidden gems, one's mind usually turns to quiet beaches, tranquil forests, and even quaint restaurants, but there is also a hidden gem in the worldwide guide dog community.

John Byfield is known around the globe for his years of experience as a guide dog Trainer/Instructor. He has worked for many schools, with many breeds, in varying capacities, and has shared his endless knowledge as a speaker at conferences in various countries, many times over.

John's career began in June of 1958 when he was hired as an Apprentice Trainer for The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDBA) at their Leamington Spa Training Center in Warwickshire, England. GDBA provides guide dogs, mobility and other rehabilitation services to those who need them across the United Kingdom. In 1961 John was transferred to their new Bolton,

Lancashire Training Center, where he worked for three additional years.

In 1964 John emigrated to the United States with wife Pam and two young sons to join Guide Dog Foundation in Smithtown, New York. He began his tenure there as a Trainer/Instructor and was appointed Training Director in 1966, aiding in their mission to provide guide dogs and training to those who needed them at no charge, and developing their training program.

Robbie and Charlie Kaman were beginning Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation in Connecticut in the early 1980s and hired John as their first employee and Training Director in 1981. He stayed with Fidelco for 28 years and had the opportunity to develop their In-Community Placement program, allowing recipients to train with their new guide dogs at home, where they live and work, instead of going to classes on the school's campus.

John joined Freedom Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc., in April of 1999 as the Director of Training. Interestingly, he was hired by Freedom Executive Director Eric Loori, who previously had been hired by John at both Guide Dog Foundation and Fidelco! After working at Freedom's upstate New York campus for a few years, John moved to Florida in 2003 and commuted regularly to New York. Since Freedom's Hometown Training™ program allows for placing guide dogs with clients at their home, he trained guide dogs in New York and Florida and helped with placements along the entire east coast of the United States while commuting back and forth. Already based mainly in Florida, John became Freedom's Director of Southern Operations about six years ago and now oversees guide dog placements in Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas.

Throughout John's career he trained guide dogs and coordinated their placement with approximately 1200 blind and visually impaired clients. He has been uniquely active throughout the years with no lapses, and was sure to find positions where he could both train



An old black and white photo of John Byfield training at Guide Dogs, UK

dogs and instruct people. John has done work for the International Guide Dog Federation and was a charter member of their Development Committee. In that capacity he evaluated guide dog programs in Australia, Japan, Spain, Germany, France, and Canada, and once spent two weeks in Poland working with a new program.

John has trained Dalmatians, Weimaraners and mixed breed dogs as guides, although the mainstay is Labradors, Golden Retrievers and German Shepherds. Walking is not as easy as in the early days, but he is still able and has never lost interest. "I'm always stimulated by instructing and training, and I still have some mileage in me!" he laughs. "It's a great feeling every time a pair qualifies, and it takes many people working together to come to the end result. The trainer is visible, but puppy raisers, volunteers and staff members all have a part in what we do." And his wife, Pam, has remained supportive through all the traveling.

John's retirement in the late spring of 2020 doesn't mean that Byfield is a name missing from the guide dog world. Grandson Nick Byfield is a Trainer at The Seeing Eye, Inc. in New Jersey. He has been there for several years and is very enthusiastic. John said, "We are very proud of him and what he's doing."

Celebrating 62 years as a guide dog Trainer/Instructor, John is looking forward to the whatever his next chapter will bring!



John Byfield training a poodle in Florida

Expanding Research At Guide Dogs UK ; A Focus On Human Behavioural Sciences

Guide Dogs' Research Team Guide Dogs, UK

Guide Dogs' research programme underpins the key objective of providing life-changing services to the two million people in the UK living with sight loss. Guide Dogs' research in canine science has been a primary focus for many years and has achieved worldwide recognition and status. Guide Dogs launched a new research strategy in 2020, and we are excited to introduce our human behavioural sciences stream.

Guide Dogs' research programme

The Guide Dogs' Research Team is based at the National Breeding Centre in Warwickshire. Research Associates conduct internal research projects and collaborate with external organisations and academics undertaking research on our behalf or using our data. The research programme helps Guide Dogs understand the needs of our service users, as well as maximising the care provided to our dogs. Our goal is to undertake quality research that provides a sound evidence base to support policies, operational procedures, and campaigns. Our

research programme provides the evidence we need to enable people with sight loss to live actively, live independently, and live well.

Research projects are commissioned in response to both internal and external requests. All projects undergo a robust review process, as well as ethical review where appropriate, to ensure the work is scientifically valid, ethically sound and offers tangible benefits to the organisation and our stakeholders. Our work draws on a range of qualitative and quantitative methods and relies on engagement with a range of stakeholders; including customers, volunteers and staff. The research team are keen to share the knowledge gained and, where relevant, aims to publish the results to the benefit of the wider community. We are always happy to share our work, please just get in touch.

Canine science

The focus of our well-established canine science programme is to support the behaviour, health and wellbeing of all our dogs. We aim to ensure that our breeding, training and welfare practices are grounded in scientific evidence and consider the

individual needs of the dog. Over the past couple of years Guide Dogs have worked on projects including designing a standardised socialisation program for puppies and understanding factors affecting dystocia, stillbirth and neonatal survival.

Over the next few years our canine science focus will be to:

- Develop a new system to measure behaviour throughout the lifetime of the dog
- Create a database of the full genome sequence of 3,000 dogs, enabling us to breed dogs that are better suited for the guiding role and continue to support our dogs' health and wellbeing.
- Explore the impact of neutering female dogs before or after puberty on growth, behavioural development, health and progression through training.

Human behavioural sciences

In 2020 we launched a new area of research, human behavioural sciences, with the aim of supporting the emotional wellbeing of our service users, their family and friends. This builds on previous work including the development of a mobility-related quality-of-life measure for people with vision impairment and exploring how a dog attack affects the wellbeing of the guide dog owner. Human behavioural sciences comprise a range of disciplines that explore psychological and social processes; including people's interactions with the environment and other species.

Our human behavioural sciences programme will provide evidence to support service development, service quality and enhance our customer reach. Over the coming years, our research will prioritise: identifying barriers to service access; supporting wellbeing; improving engagement with support networks; understanding our impact; identifying areas for improvement; and providing an evidence base for initiating human behaviour change. Initial focus will be on projects centred around wellbeing and enhancing service outcomes. Earlier this year Guide Dogs, in



A woman with vision impairment, holding a white cane, stands with a Guide Dogs UK Orientation and Mobility Specialist at a pedestrian crossing.

conjunction with the University of Nottingham, commissioned an online survey to assess the impact of COVID19 restrictions on people with vision impairment.

Future human behavioural sciences projects will:

- Aid the ongoing evaluation and development of the buddy dogs service for children. Outputs from this work will increase our understanding of customer wants and needs; and

increase knowledge around the emotional wellbeing of children with a vision impairment.

- Improve our understanding of the impact of vision impairment on peoples' lives. We aim to develop outcome measures that reflect what people living with sight loss identify as the most important facets of living active and independent lives. Outputs will help Guide Dogs understand our impact and future service improvement.

The research programme has been fortunate to work with a large number of universities, organisations and assistance dog schools. The team are always keen to establish new collaborations and welcome contact from external organisations, institutions, and IGDF schools regarding proposed research projects. You can contact us on research@guidedogs.org.uk for more information and to explore potential opportunities for collaboration.

From “No Dogs Allowed” To A Warm Welcome

Bracha Ben-Avraham
Israel Guide Dog Center

In the late 1960s the well-known singer-songwriter José Feliciano wrote a protest song called “No Dogs Allowed”. The song recounted how he attempted to enter the British Isles with his guide dog and was refused entry by an airport official, who told him: “You can sing and work and play for the crowd, but I’m sorry, sir, no dogs allowed.”

The British Isles had long-standing quarantine laws which were established to keep the country rabies-free, and no dogs were allowed to enter Great Britain without first being quarantined for six months. However, in January of 2012 - more than 40 years after Feliciano wrote his song - Great Britain eliminated its entry restrictions for dogs and other mammals and changed the regulations to fit those of the European Community. The elimination of the centuries-old quarantine laws was a

revolutionary legislation for guide dog users everywhere.

The British Friends Organization of the Israel Guide Dog Center was eager to host a guide dog team from Israel, and in February of 2013 my guide dog Dinka and I had the honor of being the first guide dog team from Israel (and possibly from any non-European country) to enter the United Kingdom. The Director of our Resource Development Department Dennis Allon and I made the trip together. I meticulously completed the strict entry requirements of obtaining veterinary treatments for Dinka and filling out the necessary forms. When we were issued a permit to enter the City of London by the Heathrow Animal Reception Center official and walked through passport control with Dinka in harness I sensed that we were living a historic moment.

During that landmark trip we were warmly received by many people, including former M.P. David Blunkett, Amos Miller who was then head of the British Guide Dog Users' Association, Anthony Kraiss who is the former Chief Executive of the Jewish Blind Society in England and Lifelong President of the British Friends of the Israel Guide Dog Center, as well as Rabbi Ephraim Mervis, who had recently become the Head Rabbi of London. The trip opened the door for other graduates of the Israel Guide Dog Center to visit the British Isles and strengthened the ties between the center, Great Britain, and its Jewish community in London and Manchester.

José Feliciano no longer uses a guide dog, but has retained a close relationship with the Israel Guide Dog Center for many years. A year and a half after my groundbreaking trip to Great Britain Feliciano traveled to Israel to give a benefit concert for the Israel Guide Dog Center. When I met José before the concert he was delighted to learn that I had entered Great Britain



José Feliciano

with Dinka the previous year, and in many ways our meeting marked the closure of a circle. The important issue of unlimited international travel for guide dog users that Feliciano raised in his song “No Dogs Allowed” had finally been resolved!

Dinka is a Labrador - golden retriever cross who was born at the Israel Guide Dog Center in October, 2010. She and I were paired when she was two years old, and our partnership lasted for over 7 wonderful years. During the course of our partnership we traveled to the United States, Canada, and Great Britain several times to engage in fundraising and publicity work for the center, and we even flew as far as Hawaii to visit my family. During those trips my fabulous guide dog led me effortlessly along the crowded sidewalks of Manhattan, through the House of Commons and Westminster Abby in London, accompanied me to the Canadian Parliament and Niagara Falls, and hiked along the trails on Maui's volcano at an altitude of more than 4,000 feet. She did her job beautifully wherever we went and was loved and admired by everyone we met.

Dinka is now retired and has been adopted by a loving family who raised one of Dinka's litter-mates and was eager to care for her when she retired. In February of 2020 I was partnered with Bardot - a lovely female black Labrador retriever. Parting with Dinka - the dog who made history with me - was difficult, but Bardot is proving to be a faithful and loving companion.



Dinka in Hawaii wearing a traditional Lei

We Believe In Travel Independence For All

**Rachelle Kniffen-Director of
Communications and Marketing
Leader Dogs for the Blind, USA**

The Leader Dogs for the Blind (LDB) vision statement "...is that every person who is blind or visually impaired travels safely and independently." To reach this vision, we diverted from strictly offering guide dog training almost 20 years ago. If you include our participation in a Sonic-aid testing program (a device using lasers to identify objects) our reach beyond guide dog training goes back to 1968.

Orientation & Mobility Training (O&M)

We began our O&M Training program after noticing that many people applying for a guide dog did not have the required baseline O&M skills. This was often a result of these individuals not having access to O&M training in their community. Our program packs learning that can take weeks or even months with the standard delivery method into just seven days, working one-on-one with a certified O&M specialist (COMS).



Client Brooke during O&M Training

The program uses time away from home distractions to solidify skills and the understanding of orientation concepts. In 2020, we expanded our O&M program to include multiple training options. Client offerings include Introduction to O&M if they've had little to no O&M training, O&M Brush-Up after a recent change in vision, Guide Dog Readiness to learn more about guide dog travel, and Advanced O&M to increase confidence in complex environments.

To date, our COMS have trained over 900 people to travel using a white cane. About half of these clients return to LDB to train with a guide dog.

GPS Training

Leader Dog began offering GPS training in 2005 as a standalone program open to cane users and guide dog users (Leader Dogs or otherwise). Over the years we provided input to several GPS manufacturers to help make the devices more user friendly, so today GPS is incorporated in our Guide Dog Training and Summer Experience Camp programs.

Our continued commitment to GPS technology is based on the positive results reported from our clients. They describe how GPS helps them establish, maintain or re-establish orientation, plan a travel route in an unfamiliar area, and find destinations along unfamiliar routes.

Summer Experience Camp

Since 2007 we have been supplying teenagers (16-17 years old) a week of fun, friendship and skill building through our Summer Experience Camp. The program combines activities like rock wall climbing and tandem biking



Summer Experience Camp-riding conference bike



Nutmeg and Victor Reader Trek, GPS training

with leadership-building exercises and Leader Dog-exclusive activities—GPS training and spending time with our guide dog mobility instructors and dogs in training. This combination increases independent travel skills, interpersonal skills and leadership skills.

In 2020, we took Summer Experience Camp virtual and were able to include more teenagers from a wider age range (14-17 years old). Camp included lessons in leadership, a mentor panel, a Q&A on traveling with a guide dog, a trivia night, a craft, an in-home scavenger hunt and a closed Facebook group for socializing with fellow camp participants.

Returning to our vision of "every person ... travels safely and independently," we invite you to contact us if you are interested in learning more about any of the programs we offer. Contact us at LeaderDog@LeaderDog.org.



Summer Experience Camp-riding a tandem bike

New Resource On Early Socialization

Dani Prebensen, Zita Penrose
Guide Dogs Queensland

Elizabeth Rote
Southeastern Guide Dogs

Jane Russenberger
Guiding Eyes for the Blind

From birth to 8 or 10 weeks of age, the brains of puppies develop rapidly. During this early puppyhood, there is tremendous opportunity to shape and mould that development by exposing puppies to novel stimuli. Research has shown that puppies who pass through this early development stage in novel and stimulating environments that change from day to day during these weeks will more often develop into confident, capable adult dogs suited for training as guides for those with vision loss or visual impairments.

Many guide dog organizations have developed amazing programs that

expose puppies to many stimuli, but there has not been any centralized resource where people new to the field could learn about some of the socialization techniques that work in various parts of the world. To make some information more generally available, a small group of four experienced individuals from IGDF member organizations with a combined total of over 50 years of experience raising puppies worked together to create an information website, complete with video and pictures explaining what they have found to work successfully across 3 guide dog organizations. All IGDF members (and the public) are invited to use this website (<https://www.iwdr.org/early-socialization-home/>), which is hosted by the International Working Dog Registry (IWDR).

The Early Socialization resource provides age appropriate guidelines for introducing puppies to various stimuli and learning opportunities. The steps described by this resource have proven to help puppies build confidence to novelty and noise, develop motor

skills, increase adaptability to change, foster responsiveness working with people and to develop basic skills that enhance a smoother transition of each puppy to its puppy raiser's home. The content was created by experts from Guide Dogs Queensland, Southeastern Guide Dogs, and Guiding Eyes for the Blind, based on practical protocols as well as reference material from other respected and reliable industry resources. The guidelines are organized in a week-by-week format, providing age-appropriate, progressive guidance including goals, suggestions for environmental enrichment, techniques for interactive activities, and approaches for solving problems. The goal of this project is to expose staff and volunteers to techniques that have proven to work at these 3 cutting-edge guide dog organizations. The website also supports all organizations within the working dog community by encouraging the adoption of approaches that produce emotionally stable puppies that understand the concept of learning and working with people. We hope you will find this resource useful.

Hong Kong Guide Dogs Association And Ocean Park Signed A MOU To Enhance Breeding And Increase Local Guide Dog Supply

Naptin To - Executive Director
Hong Kong Guide Dog Association, Hong Kong

On the 9th of July 2020, the Hong Kong Guide Dogs Association (HKGDA) and Ocean Park (the Park), Hong Kong's unique home-grown theme park, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), whereby the Park will provide technical assistance in the processing and storage of local guide dog semen for a period of five years up to June 2025. The collaboration aims to alleviate the long-existing shortage of guide dogs in Hong Kong by increasing the number of locally bred guide dogs for the needs of the visually impaired. There are around 175,000 people with visual impairments in Hong Kong; however, there are currently only about 45

working guide dogs in the city and the demand for guide dog service clearly exceeds supply. The collaboration will also enable HKGDA to exchange reproductive material with other guide dog schools.

Ocean Park has long championed an extensive array of local biodiversity conservation and wildlife protection initiatives. The Park's veterinary team conducts wildlife rescue operations and rehabilitation, helps train veterinary medicine and life sciences students, and promotes conservation awareness among the general public on a regular basis.

Ocean Park has established a scientifically controlled breeding

programme for dolphins in its care. In collaboration with The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and SeaWorld in the United States, the Park achieved the world's first successful conception of Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins using artificial insemination.

With the Park's advanced facilities and experts, this collaboration shall be able to enhance HKGDA's breeding capability and capacity. HKGDA is delighted to join forces with Ocean Park to strengthen local guide dog breeding in the hope of boosting the number of successfully trained guide dogs in the city, who will go on to help empower their human partners to live a more fulfilling life.



Group photo for the ceremony

Creating Connected Communities

Gemma Hills
Guide Dogs Victoria, Australia

When we first embarked on our ambitious online community hub project, we could never have foreseen just how vital it would be, with the online hub acquiring a whole new level of importance as the COVID-19 situation took hold. It was suddenly more crucial than ever that a safe, accessible space be created to support the whole Guide Dogs community through this unprecedented global crisis, and so, the Guide Dogs online hub “My Community, My Way” (the hub) was launched almost an entire 12 months earlier than originally planned.

Background

In 2019 we had conducted a major piece of research and co-design work with Swinburne University and DXC Technology, that established people with low vision or blindness face persistent challenges in accessibility of digital information, and overcoming isolation and managing social connections.

We knew that digital inclusion and social inclusion are intimately connected. We also recognised that as societies move toward a situation of “digital by default” where information, services and social interaction are increasingly accessed first or even primarily online, exclusion will only be deepened if those channels

are not made accessible for people with disabilities.

Overcoming these barriers would be crucial for ensuring people with low vision or blindness were able to participate fully in society, especially during COVID-19, when physical access to these resources and connections was increasingly limited. The hub sought to address these issues by enabling members of this growing community to gain access to reliable, high-quality information and participate in events, activities and social gatherings, all from the comfort and safety of their own homes.

During the early weeks of COVID-19, our Client Reference Group participants also made it clear. They wanted online, accessible community-led support groups that enabled discussions on areas of interest to them. They expressed an urgent need for reliable, current, accessible information about issues that would affect them during COVID-19 restrictions.

We needed to create a place with more accessible information, social connections, and links to more services. The answer was already in the pipeline; now we just needed to complete the build and accelerate its launch significantly. With almost a whole 12 months less than originally planned, we needed help.

Making a big difference with a little help from our friends

At the heart of every Guide Dog organisation is the Client and the shared belief that everyone should have access to the support and tools required to live a free and independent life. We're here to help Clients live their lives, their way – and that's something we can be proud



Screenshot of ‘My Community, My Way’ website

of. Something we knew we could be even more proud of the more people we could reach.

It was time to join forces, so we reached out and quickly formed a collaboration with Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, Guide Dogs QLD and Guide Dogs SA/NT, enlisting ‘content finders’ and accessibility testers from all six states/territories. The non-profit division of tech giant Salesforce came through and donated pro bono time of an architect and developer. Within two short months the hub was ready to test. After a comprehensive testing period, and valuable feedback from a test group of Clients, the hub was launched nationally on Monday, 24 August 2020.

To date, the hub has 403 registered users across Victoria, NSW, Queensland, the ACT, the NT, and South Australia. Almost 55% of users have identified as a person with blindness or low vision, while almost 22% are professionals working with someone who has blindness or low vision, 14% are supporters of Guide Dogs and a further 6% are parents, carers or friends of someone with low vision or blindness (remaining 3% unidentified).

Looking ahead

With the backing of the Guide Dogs Australia Board of Directors, we are now looking ahead to phase two of our hub rollout. This phase will include improving the hub's accessibility from an AA rating to AAA, further work to enrich the user journey and interface, and enabling live posting and chat forums to help create more connected communities. Each of these elements has been scoped and costed, and we are currently awaiting the outcome of a grant application which, if successful, will help us roll this next phase out over the coming months.

Guide Dogs Victoria CEO, Karen Hayes, said about the hub:

“As with every project we undertake with our interstate and international Guide Dog partners, we learn the power of collaboration for mutual benefit. As Guide Dog organisations, we are one big team, with a single focus on the Clients we serve. We are more the same than we are different and there is much to learn if we have the courage to open our minds to new ways of working together.”



Client accessing ‘My Community, My Way’ website via a laptop computer.

From Kaliningrad To Magadan On Horse Sleigh

Dogs as Assistants for Disabled People, Russia

Russia is the biggest country in the world. It is more than 6500 kilometers or more than nine hours by plane from Kaliningrad to Magadan, but there are no straight flights. If the alumni of our dog training center «Dogs as Assistants for Disabled People» decided to go to each other's homes, they would have to make a transfer in Moscow, and it would take them more than one day and one night!

The staff members of our center have always understood how important it is to provide an aftercare support for our alumni. Before 2017 this option was available only through the internet or telephone. Then we had a financial opportunity to employ and teach a tutor, who would visit the alumni all over Russia.

During the last three years, two aftercare tutors have made more than one hundred visits to the alumni, and 45 visits to the people from our waiting list for getting a guide dog, in sixty cities and thirty regions of Russia.

Besides the visit, the tutors coordinate the people from the waiting list, match guide dogs to these people, organize the trips for the blind students to get their guide dog and to learn how to work with this dog, take a part in the blind students' training, and give orientation and mobility classes. When our blind students and their dogs graduate, the aftercare tutor is already aware of their peculiarities and experience, which lets them work with the blind students and their guide dogs more effectively at their home.

During the first year after giving the dog to the person, the aftercare tutor regularly contacts them via telephone or internet to investigate and to control their collaborative work, and to answer their questions.

Then the tutors come to their home to observe the couple's work and, if necessary, to correct its details, and to help the couple solve the coming

up difficulties. In farther perspective, if the couple works well, the tutor schedules regular follow up support, when the blind person provides veterinary documents on the guide dog's health and the photo and video report of their work.

Because the aftercare support has been working only for three years, many alumni and people who are on the waiting list get surprised, that we will really come to their home to provide help and to assess their work with the guide dog. "Are you really going to fly five hours by plane, then go ten hours by train and then half of the next day by horse sleigh?" – they ask in surprise.

You can get to most parts of Russia with significant comfort, however, there are farthest regions in the north, where you can get only when the lakes and the seas are covered with ice, and air-cushion crafts work. Therefore, one way to a small settlement in Siberia can take a couple of days and you will have to use several kinds of transport.

Now we are very inspired with what happens, and with the kinds of help, which we can provide. We work on the city routes and domestic obedience and improve accessibility in transport and to the objects of the city environment. We conduct events and trainings for the staff members

of different organizations, tell them about the actual laws and how to act if a blind person with a guide dog came to their organization.

Sometimes an aftercare tutor can notice some small details, which will significantly influence the life of a blind person. For example, a tutor can recommend some convenient delivery service of the food for the guide dog to a farther city. Through such help, the keepers of the guide dogs can save the third part of their money every month and improve their level of life.

During the past three years, we observed positive changes in the quality of the work with our alumni all over the country. But our center has money funds for aftercare support only until January 2021. However, we believe and hope that in some time we will get financial opportunities both for continuing, and for broadening the aftercare program, and also for opening the new guide dog schools in different regions of Russia. Then the blind people will be able to get to our classes faster and more conveniently. And after coming back home, our alumni will feel reliable support and confidence through quick, immediate and relevant help, both in the most difficult and in the happiest moments!



Map of Russia, showing just how large it is

the future of the VISIONARY

The next deadline
for Visionary
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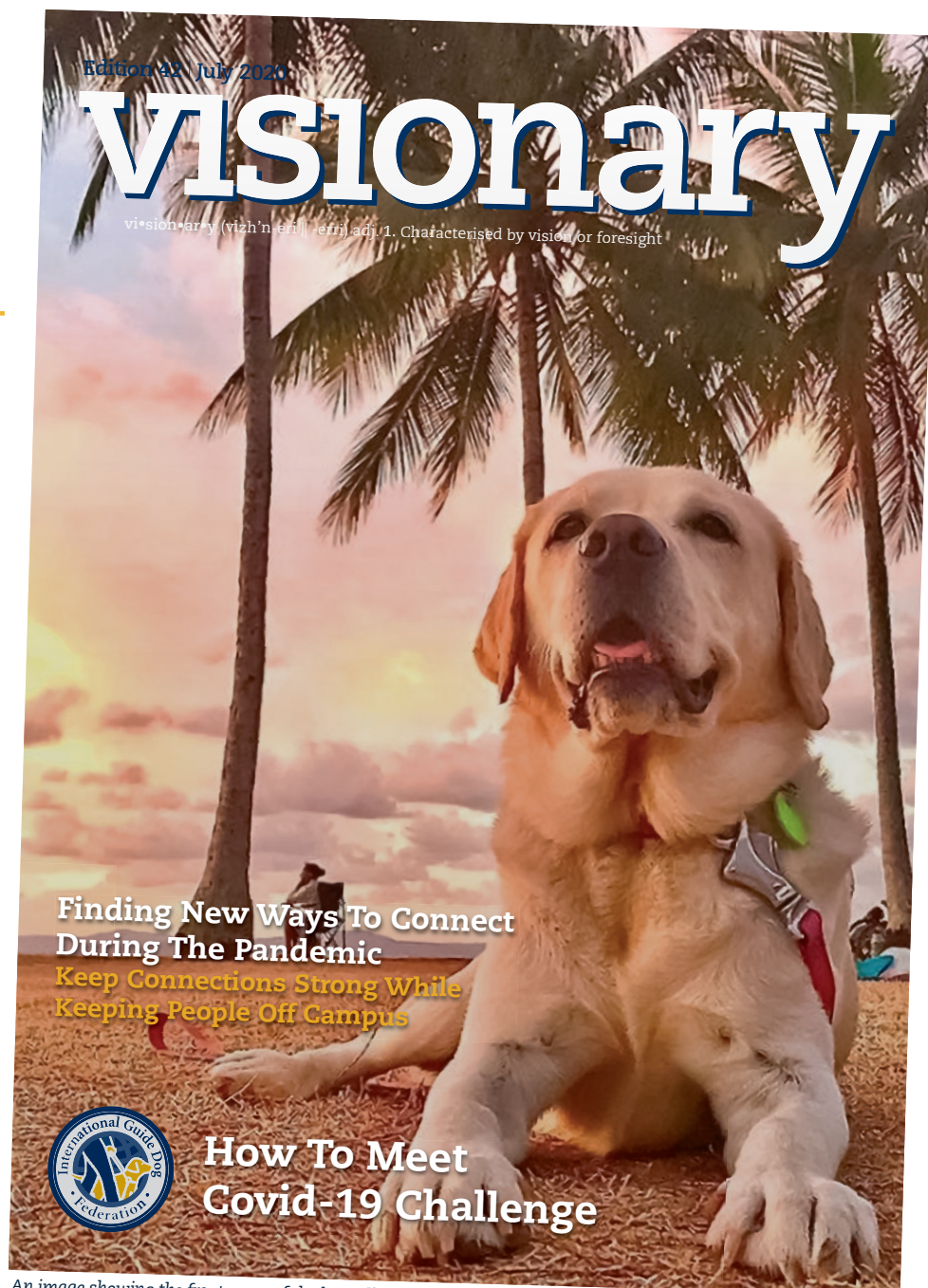
1st February 2021

Special Feature: Educating Guide Dogs During Covid.

Please supply your articles as a
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completed submission form,
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For the index, please include a
one-sentence description of
your article.



An image showing the front cover of the last edition of 'The Visionary'.

