

# ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND of WA

## The first Guide Dogs

Dogs were first used to guide the blind in 1819 when Herr Johann Wilhelm Klein founded an institute for the blind in Vienna. His ideas were later put into practice in 1916, when Dr Gerhard Stalling established a school to train dogs to assist German soldiers who had been blinded in the first World War. By the late 1920's a school had been established in the USA and by 1931, in Italy and England.



## The first Australian Guide Dog

The first working guide dog in Australia was "Dreena". Doctor Arnold Cook brought Dreena to Perth from England in 1950.

Dr Cook had become blind with the eye condition, retinitis pigmentosa, at the age of eighteen. He learned Braille and then studied at the University of Western Australia (UWA) where he gained a degree in Arts, majoring in Economics and later gained a doctorate from Harvard University. He was awarded a Hackett Scholarship and studied at the London School of Economics.



On his return to Western Australia, he lectured in Economics at UWA. With the support of the Claremont Apex Club, he established Australia's first guide dog organisation in Perth in 1951. Within 12 months, the first Australian trained guide dog, "Beau", was working with its owner, Elsie Mead. Ten years later a national organisation was established and a guide

dog and mobility training centre was opened in Kew, Melbourne, in 1962.

## Guide Dogs in WA

The Association for the Blind is the official provider of guide dogs in Western Australia. Guide dog training has continued here since the 1950's. However, until 1999, the breeding and initial twelve month training were undertaken in Victoria. In 2000, the Association re-established the puppy-walking program in Perth.

## Breeds

In Australia, the Labrador is the main breed of dog used as a guide dog. Recently, however, there has been cross-breeding of Labradors with Golden Retrievers, and more recently, Standard Poodles, to produce the Labradoodle (which was specifically bred for people who have an allergy to normal dog hair).

The Labrador is ideally suited to be a guide dog because it has a placid temperament, requires little maintenance, comes in a variety of sizes and it is highly trainable. It is a responsive, intelligent dog that learns quickly. Some of its best characteristics are the range of shapes, sizes and personalities that allow for a close match with the needs of vision impaired people. The Labrador's greatest asset is its willingness to please.



## Breeding

Guide dog associations throughout Australia breed more than 200 Labrador puppies each year to train as guide dogs. The breeding process begins long before the guide dog puppy is born. Specially selected bitches (mothers) and dogs (fathers) are chosen from proven breeding lines. This way, the occurrence of inherited conditions can be minimized. About nine weeks after the "parents" have been mated, the puppies are born. Litters can vary from one or two puppies to eight or nine. Puppies vary in colour, from black to cream, including chocolate. The puppy stays with its mother for approximately eight weeks and then commences training as a guide dog.

## Puppy walking

Each puppy is placed with people (often families with children) chosen for their ability to care for the puppy. Known as "puppy walkers" these families teach the puppy basic skills such as house training, sitting on command and walking correctly on a leash.



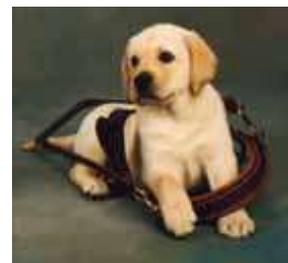
Socialisation is one of the most important parts of training given to the puppy by its puppy walkers. This involves taking it to

shopping centres, railway stations, city centres and a range of other places it is likely to encounter during its training and subsequent work as a guide dog.

## The Big Test!

When the puppy is about 12 months old, it is assessed for its suitability for training as a guide dog. During a two week period, it is assessed for its reactions to other dogs,

cats, trains, buses and other situations it is likely to encounter as a working guide dog. Dogs that are unsuitable may either be trained as companion dogs for people who have a disability or they may be offered for sale. For the successful dogs, a rigorous and intensive five month training program commences.



## A perfect match

When people who are blind or vision impaired apply to have a guide dog, they undergo a program to assess their suitability. Usually, guide dogs are only given to adults who can care for the dog and give them plenty of work and exercise. A guide dog instructor then works with the guide dog and its new owner for about four weeks.



## A Guide Dog's working life

Guide dogs are smart, but they aren't rocket scientists.

The guide dog is taught to judge the width it has to allow in order for the vision impaired person to avoid bumping into things such as other people, prams and bicycles.

The dog is also taught to judge heights, which enable it to avoid overhead obstacles such as overhanging branches. It is not the dog that makes the decision about when to cross the road. In general, the owner knows whether traffic is moving, or whether cars have stopped.

The owner then gives the "forward" command to the dog to cross the road. If the owner has not heard the approach of a vehicle, the dog will refuse the command,

then proceed once the car has passed. Before training with a guide dog, the owner is well oriented to the area and able to direct the dog to the destination. Having travelled the route a number of times, the dog will remember the route. There are many cases where guide dog users have reported that their dogs have remembered a particular doorway or house, even when they have not visited the place for twelve months.



The guide dog is taught that it is on duty when in harness. However, it can be easily distracted and shouldn't be patted when in harness.

When out of harness, it behaves just like any family dog.

### Guide Dogs can go anywhere

Guide dogs are allowed to travel free of charge on all forms of transport, including trains, buses, taxis, and the passenger section of aircraft. Guide dogs are also allowed to enter any public place including restaurants, hospitals, shops, theatres, hotels, and motels. It is an offence to refuse entry to a person accompanied by a registered guide dog.

### A happy retirement

Guide dogs are normally about 18 months old when they are allocated to a vision impaired person and should have about 8-10 working years ahead of them. When a guide dog retires it usually stays with the guide dog user and enjoys a normal home life.

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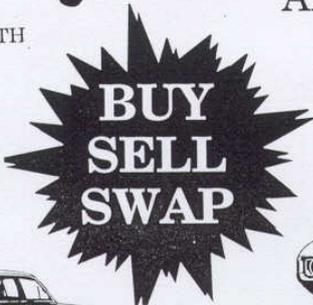


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