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Nonfiction/Make Connections

A Dog Named Buddy

by Karen Zeinart

<p>The idea of training dogs to act as guides for the blind is quite old. In fact, Johann W. Klein published a book in Austria in 1819 that described how to train a dog guide and included a description of a special harness to be worn by the animal. Although there was interest in teaching dogs to be guides, very little was actually done for another hundred years.</p>	<p><i>Connection Example:</i></p> <p><i>I've seen guide dogs with blind people at malls and parks, but I never really thought about how long ago someone came up with the idea.</i></p>
<p>After World War I ended in 1918, the German government was faced with the problem of trying to help its war-blinded soldiers return to civilian life. Dr. Gerhard Stalling believed German shepherds could be trained to be dog guides. The animals had already proven quite useful during the war. The dogs had been trained to find wounded soldiers on the battlefield and had demonstrated the ability to learn quickly and to perform reliably. Four dog guide schools were started in Germany and, within ten years, many guides were being used in that country.</p>	
<p>Dorothy Eustis, an American, was living in Switzerland at the time. She bred and trained German shepherds for police work and guard duty. When she heard about the schools in Germany, she and her dog trainer, Jack Humphrey, went to the school at Potsdam to watch the dogs in action.</p>	
<p>At Potsdam, each dog being trained wore a rigid harness similar to the one that had been described in Johann Klein's book. The harness helped the person being guided to understand the dog's movements. Any slack in the harness meant a change in direction or that there was an obstacle in the path. The dog was trained to pull back and stand still at curbs so the one being led could find the edge of the curb with his foot. When the dog guide approached steps, he sat down. The dog was also trained to anticipate trouble. For example, if the trainer ordered the dog forward but a low hanging sign or branch was in the way, the dog knew to walk around the obstacle.</p>	

<p>Mrs. Eustis was so impressed with what she saw that she wanted to inform all blind people about the help that was available to them. In 1927, she wrote an article for The Saturday Evening Post discussing the school at Potsdam. Later she traveled around the United States to encourage organizations for blind people to start dog guide programs. Unfortunately, some of the groups she contacted were not interested in such a program, and others did not have enough money to start one. Some of the leaders of these groups felt that dog guides would attract a lot of attention, attention most blind persons wanted to avoid. Why not, they asked, hire a sighted person as a guide instead? Morris Frank could have answered that question.</p>	
<p>At that time, Morris Frank, blinded at 16, was living in Nashville, Tennessee, where he was an insurance agent and a part-time student at Vanderbilt University. In order to get to his office or classroom, he hired a sighted person to be his guide. It was a practice he disliked because he felt it made him too dependent on other people. His opportunity to try a different kind of guide arose in 1927 when Frank's father read Dorothy Eustis' article to him.</p>	
<p>After hearing the article, Frank contacted Dorothy Eustis and told her about his interest in a dog guide. Arrangements were made for him to go to the Eustis estate in Switzerland, known as Fortunate Fields, in April, 1928. There he worked with Jack Humphrey and a dog that became his guide and companion for almost ten years, a dog named Buddy.</p>	
<p>At first the training was very difficult. Buddy was loyal to her trainer, Jack Humphrey, and Frank had difficulty in completely trusting her. During daily training sessions, Jack walked beside the pair, giving orders and encouraging the new team to keep working. Later Humphrey followed behind, ready to help only in an emergency. Humphrey refused to pity Frank and insisted that he learn how to work with Buddy by himself. After many weeks of hard work, Morris Frank and Buddy were ready to go to Nashville.</p>	
<p>Before Frank left for America, he talked to Mrs. Eustis about starting a Seeing Eye school in the United States. Dorothy Eustis agreed to give financial support, advice, and to help find a trainer if Morris Frank could generate enough interest in using dog guides. Frank agreed to travel all over the</p>	

<p>country to talk to organizations for blind people and to demonstrate Buddy's unusual abilities.</p>	
<p>The chance to show America what Buddy could do happened as soon as the pair arrived in New York, where reporters met the boat. They challenged Frank and Buddy to cross a busy and confusing intersection nearby. Buddy stopped while crossing several times to avoid getting hit by passing cars and trucks, but she safely guided Frank to the other side. The reporters were amazed! In fact, some of them had not even tried to cross the street themselves, thinking it too dangerous!</p>	
<p>By the time the pair arrived in Nashville, there was a great deal of interest in Buddy. Frank received many letters from other blind people wanting dog guides. Later that year, Mrs. Eustis sent money, Jack Humphrey, and two dog guides to Nashville. It was the beginning of Seeing Eye, America's first dog guide school.</p>	
<p>The training program at Seeing Eye changed much from the program first used at Fortunate Fields. Then, as now, only blind people wanting to lead active lives were trained at the school; dog guides were not meant to sit at home and be pets.</p>	
<p>Perhaps the greatest contribution the program made was that it drew attention to blind people. Others began to recognize what blind people could accomplish rather than what they could not do. And that was very satisfying for Dorothy Eustis, Morris Frank, and a dog named Buddy.</p>	



Photo Connection: