

Dear Puppy Raisers,

My name is Dawn and I'm from Michigan. I'm 45 years old. LeaderDog Lady is my first LeaderDog.

Let me tell you a little about myself. I was born 4 weeks early and my eyes never fully developed. My pupils are much smaller in size and shaped like an old fashioned key hole. They are lower down and not centered. My eyelids are droopy with little to no muscles. I am legally blind.

From the time I started walking until I turned 40, I never used a white cane. I would trip, fall, fall down stairs, and walk into glass doors. I never did anything by myself. Someone always needed to help me. I was bullied while growing up. I attended sighted school. My local Lions Club ordered bigger print books and some of my teachers would help me when I needed it. I did graduate from high school, class of 1990. My GPA was 2.0, which I was satisfied with considering school was very hard for me, but I was determined to do the best I could.

My eye doctors would always tell me, "You see good enough." After I had my cataract surgery, which helped my sight for only a few months, I told my eye doctor that this wasn't good enough for me anymore. I needed some help, and I didn't mean by people around me. I meant help to gain my independence.

So, here I am, 40 years old and learning how to use a white cane. It wasn't fun!! People would stare at me and I lost friends because they were embarrassed by being seen with me walking with my cane.

So here is where the fun starts!!

September 2014

43 years old

I went to a convention for people that were visually impaired and blind. Three day convention in a good sized hotel and I was doing this alone. I walked into the banquet hall and there were tables set up with people everywhere. I visited every table and received a lot of information. But the one that really captured my attention the most was LeaderDogs for the Blind. I talked to the guy that was standing by the table and asked tons of questions which he answered all of them. Before I left he said, "Here is all the information about LeaderDogs, think about it." I shook his hand and thanked him for his time.

A couple weeks went by and I decided to make the call, I talked with client services and they sent me an application.

January 8, 2015

I sent my application, video, and doctor's letters. Everything I needed to send back

February 11, 2015

I received a call from LeaderDogs for the Blind. When they informed me that my application was on hold, tears started to roll down my face. They were telling me that I should come to LeaderDogs for more Orientation and Mobility (O&M) training. I snapped back, that's not what I was applying for!!! They understood and requested I please come and do more white cane training. I agreed.

March 15, 2015

My parents and I drove the 3 ½ hours to LeaderDogs for the Blind. I was scared, nervous, and unsure about all of this. I kept telling myself that this will help me be more independent. I completed one week of training with one of their O&M trainers, Barry.

Barry found out real quick that I never, walked, crossed streets, or went anywhere on my own. One morning, during training, I was standing on the curb and Barry wanted me to cross the intersection. I think I stood there for ten minutes before he asked, "Why are you not crossing?"

I said, "I'm scared!!"

He whispered, "Don't think, just go!!"

I took a deep breath and I went! I stopped at the next curb and Barry patted me on the shoulder and said, "See, you can do this!!"

Before long I was doing all kinds of things that I never did before, it felt great!! I was starting to find my confidence in myself and I was doing it all on my own!! I was crossing streets, walking along the shoulder, going into places alone, it was a new me!!

In the morning on my last day of O&M training with Barry, I went on a short walk with a LeaderDog named Pepper, a very pretty Black Lab!! I had goosebumps and the biggest grin on my face!!! Pepper and I walked around the block and it felt amazing!!! When we returned I told Barry, "I want a LeaderDog!! Now what do I need to do to come back for guide dog training!"

Barry replied with, "Go home, practice your routes, gain more confidence and you'll be here again."

So I returned home, started walking, crossing streets, and most importantly doing it all on my own!

April 8, 2015

Sent second video to LeaderDogs!!! Knowing I wouldn't hear anything back until the 21st I was very nervous, full of butterflies. I wanted this so very bad!!!

April 21, 2015

It was my 44th birthday!!

The only thing that would make this birthday the best ever was if I got the call!! It's 5:45pm and I am sitting at my niece's softball game, it was cold and raining. My cell phone is ringing. I started to cry. LeaderDogs was calling me!!!

Me: "Hello"

LeaderDogs: "Hello Dawn, Happy Birthday!"

Me: "Thank you!!"

LeaderDogs: "We watched your second video"

Me: "I Know" Tears rolling down my cheeks.

LeaderDogs: "Are you sitting down?"

Me: "Yes"

LeaderDogs: "The committee has made their decision."

Me: "Okay"

LeaderDogs: "Congratulations you're coming to LeaderDogs for guide dog training!!!!"

Me: All I could get out was "WHEN!!"

LeaderDogs: "we are looking for a dog, but will be a June/July/August class, we are not sure which one."

Me: "Thank you for making my Birthday perfect!!"

June 2, 2015

LeaderDogs called me to tell me they found a dog for me and asked if I could be at LeaderDogs on July 12, 2015!!!! I said, "Absolutely!!"

July 12, 2015

Move in day, for my 26 day guide dog training!!! I was so excited, not nervous or scared.

July 14, 2015

I got to meet my guide dog!!

19 months old, 54 pounds, Female, Black Labrador Retriever.

Name: LeaderDog Lady

July 14 to August 5

Training with LeaderDog Lady!!! It was hard, a lot to learn. Lectures and training a couple times a week. I was determined and focused. LeaderDog Lady and I had our ups and downs, but we worked through it as a team.

All the hard work paid off!!! At the end of the training, WE GRADUATED!!!

Before I left LeaderDog, I wanted to know more about Lady's puppy raiser. They asked me why. I replied, "I would like to send a letter and thank the person for raising lady and I wanted to stay in touch with them."

August 5, 2015

Before we left LeaderDogs for the Blind they gave me the information about Lady's raiser. LeaderDog Lady and I went home!!! Soon Lady met my family and friends and she went to work with me. It was like being in training all over again. This was all new for Lady and she adjusted in no time.

August 13, 2015

First day back to work.

Leader dog Lady and I went to the grocery store I work at. I am a cashier. April 2016, I'll have 20 years of service there. My store has made accommodations for me to work the register by having a bigger screen with an adjustable neck so I can bring the screen closer for me to read. They also made accommodations for LeaderDog Lady. She has a crate if she wants to go in or she lays by my feet and watches customers. Most of my regular customers come in to see Lady and then do their shopping. LeaderDog Lady is very popular at the store!! My co-workers are very good with letting me take breaks when Lady needs to park. They are also very good with the service dog rules. Sometimes I'll take the harness off and let some of my co-workers have puppy time with Lady. Few minutes and I'll say, "Lady harness" and she'll walk right to her harness ready for work again.

A few weeks went by and I sent an email to LeaderDogs to pass on to the puppy raiser. Lady was raised at Fort Dodge Correctional Facility, in Fort Dodge, Iowa. By an inmate named Kevin.

November 2016

A little over a year later.

I love to go to the mall when it's Black Friday. I know sounds crazy! LeaderDog Lady and myself, and of course my parents, head to the mall. I knew this would good for LeaderDog Lady and myself because of all the people, distractions, displays, and little kids. I was excited to do this with LeaderDog Lady!!! She did awesome for her first time shopping on one of the busiest shopping days!! When my mom found us, I told her, "You gotta see this". She was like, "Ok what"? Following LeaderDog Lady and I we walked into one of the biggest stores. It was busy with displays, people, and little kids. I said, "Lady Forward,

Lady Left, Lady Right, and Lady go find the front of the store". OMG she never changed her pace, she nailed it!! I gave her the command, Lady Sit! I knelt down and hugged and kissed her and gave her tons of praise!!! I turned around and my mom stood there in tears. "Dawn, I can't believe what I just saw!!!" she said. "LeaderDog Lady guided you through all that and never slowed down." I said, "Yep, that's how well she is trained, she is a ROCKSTAR!!!"

During that day I had a customer come up to me.....

Customer: "Why did you bring your service dog to one of the craziest days??"

Me: "Because Lady is a guide dog."

Customer: "That's stupid, it's way too busy for a guide dog!!"

Me: "Lady is a LeaderDog."

Customer: "So."

Me: "She is my eyes!!!!" (I only use this term to get my point across)

Customer: "So you're blind?"

Me: "I am legally blind so yeah kind of"

Customer: (shaking her head) "I think you both shouldn't be here. I think you're an idiot!!"

Me: "LeaderDog Lady and I have been trained for these kind of situations!!!"

With the customer looking at me I said, "It was nice talking to you, have a great day!! Lady hop up!!"

And we left the customer!!! I look down at Lady and said, "Lady you are doing great!!!! No matter what people might think!!!"

December 2016

Yep you guessed it!!! Day after Christmas sales!!! First stop, Target. I love going there after Christmas, it was perfect!! Very busy and LeaderDog Lady took it all in stride!! After that, yep headed to the mall again!!! It felt sooo good to be doing this all independently and confidently with LeaderDog Lady at my side!!

In January of 2016 I made a list of goals I wanted Lady and I to achieve!!!

1-Educate people of all ages

2-5k walk races with my sighted friends Melissa and Meg

3-Raise money for LeaderDogs for the Blind

4-Public speaking

5-Go on walks, go walk the malls, cross streets alone just Lady and I

6-Have confidence and independence

7-Fly somewhere

8-Go to puppy days

9-Meet Kevin (Lady's puppy raiser)

10-Become a member of my local Lions Club

I am happy to say that we achieved all these goals in the first 13 months together!!

August 2016

I met Kevin and it was the first time he saw Lady since 12-12-14. Kevin and I keep in touch, I send letters, make calls, e-mails to him letting him know all about our adventures.

What is sad:

Is that graduates that have LeaderDogs that were raised in a prison don't send letters or let the puppy raiser know how they are doing. I'm sending this letter to all LeaderDog puppy raisers to say THANK YOU!!!! I appreciate each and every one of you for raising puppies for LeaderDogs!!! I appreciate all the hard work, dedication, and love you give these sweet adorable puppies!!

The quote I live by:

"A dog can change the way you see the world!!!"

This quote is what I believe!!! I see the world through Lady's eyes!!!

A dog can change the way the puppy raisers see the world also.

To all puppy raisers please keep up the great work with these future LeaderDog puppies!!! You are making a huge difference in LeaderDogs for the Blind clients, changing lives every day.