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BARSTOW AND SACHIN-INSTANT LOVE

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By Sachin Pavithran

As soon as Barstow and I met, I knew we were meant for each other. We’ve been together now for almost seven years and I can’t imagine my life without him.

Barstow is my trained guide dog who helps me get where I need to go. I trust him to steer me around any obstacles in my path, and he trusts me to treat him well and not place him in danger.

I used to use a white cane, but due to the limited skills I had in using a cane, I thought a guide dog would be a better option for me. I found out about the Guide Dogs for the Blind Program in San Rafael, California and looked into it.

At the school, they breed and raise hundreds of puppies to be trained as guide dogs. When the puppies are 8 weeks old, they are sent to the “puppy raisers” who are 4-H members or just families who love dogs. The dogs go through a year of training with their puppy raisers who give them basic dog obedience training, potty training, and expose them to a variety of different environments so they are comfortable any where they go. You may have seen guide dogs in training who wear green jackets when they are out in the community.

When the dogs are ready for more training, they return to the school and professional trainers take over. They teach them basic commands, like forward, left, right, halt, sit down, heel. When the dogs are inside a building, they can be told to “find first door” which will lead them outside. When they are outside a building they can be told to “find a door” and they will go to the first door they see that will lead inside. They are trained to stop when they come to a curb.
To get started in the program, you send in an application and they send someone out to your residence to do an evaluation to see if you have the right criteria for needing a guide dog. They find out your lifestyle, your work environment, if you are a fast or slow walker. They take all that into consideration and then they try to make the best match with the personalities of the dogs they have ready.

Before I could get Barstow, I had to travel to California to live at the school and go through training with him for four weeks. The first three days I had to practice with people imitating being the dogs. On the third day, I was taken to a room and introduced to Barstow. It was instant love.

After that, he was with me 24/7. That first night, I woke up and his head was lying on the bed staring at me. It freaked me out! But after that, we found out we were a great match. My greatest challenge with Barstow was learning to put my trust in him that he knows what he is doing. On the fourth week of training, they dropped Barstow and I off in downtown San Francisco and let us find our own way back to the school. That was a challenge but we finally made it back in one piece.

All of this training is free for the user. The cost is covered by private donations and major fund raisers. The program covers the training, the cost of the air flights, bringing the dog home, giving him annual checkups and paying for all of his veterinarian expenses for life.

We keep in touch with the family that raised Barstow. They send him gifts, and when I travel and can’t take him with me, we take Barstow to them, and he gets to be with the other dogs he grew up with. When my family goes on vacation, he gets to go on his own vacation and have fun at the ocean with them and be a regular dog.

When Barstow has his harness on, he knows he is working. It is fine to pet him, but it is not good to get him excited. When he is home and his harness comes off, he is “off duty” and is treated just like any other dog. My little girl likes him a lot... “Bah-so” was her first word...but it took Barstow a few months to get comfortable with her. When she was born, he was relegated to the basement and she took over his room. But, now they are good friends.

Barstow has become a great part of my life and my family’s life. On August 29th he will be 9 years old. Happy Birthday, Barstow!
(Sachin works at the CPD as a program coordinator)