

# Precious Eyes



Andrew Sullivan for The New York Times

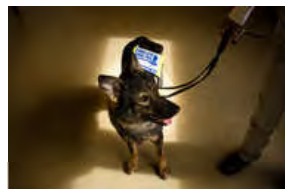
Igloo is being trained at the Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation in Bloomfield, Conn., to give a blind person more independence. [More Photos »](#)

By PAUL SULLIVAN  
Published: November 7, 2013

JENNIFER MURRAY woke after a night out with friends and thought her husband was playing a trick on her. She could not see anything and did not believe him when he said it was daytime.

[Go to Giving Special Section »](#)

### Multimedia



Guide Dog Schools

[Enlarge This Image](#)

“It was like a light switch had been shut off,” she said. “I shut my eyes, and I blinked. And I tried it again several times. Then I realized the sun was in my face, and I said, now what?”

Ms. Murray had been battling to keep what little vision she had since her premature birth in 1978. She had a bit of peripheral vision in one eye but nothing else. A few years before the day when she lost her eyesight for good, she had an operation to implant a permanent contact lens in her right eye. It gave her sight such as she had never had before.

“I was giddy for weeks,” she said. “I could see everything, and everybody was beautiful. I remember thinking life is so colorful and so pretty, and I wouldn’t have taken that back for the world.”

With her vision gone again, Ms. Murray said she began to

Log in to see what your friends are sharing [Log In With Facebook](#) on nytimes.com. [Privacy Policy](#) | [What's This?](#)

### What's Popular Now

The Passion of Parenting



F.D.A. Ruling Would All but Eliminate Trans Fats



### MOST E-MAILED

### RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

1. REAL ESTATE Q & A  
[Furnishing Buyer Information to Condominium Boards](#)



2. V.A. Is Faulted Over Landmarks' Condition

3. [Guide Dog Schools](#)

4. SINOSPHERE  
[Disabled Chinese Struggle for a Good Education, and Acceptance](#)



5. [Walker Tower Penthouse Under Contract](#)



6. [A Veteran's Path to Recovery by Marathon Racing](#)

7. AT WAR  
[Share Your Views for Veterans Day](#)

8. [Recovery on the Roads](#)

9. WELL  
[Extra Care Curbs MRSA in Hospitals](#)



10. [Court Says New York Neglected Disabled in Emergencies](#)

FACEBOOK

TWITTER

GOOGLE+

SAVE

E-MAIL

SHARE

PRINT

REPRINTS



Log in to discover more articles based on what you've read.



[Log In](#)

[Register Now](#)

[Log In](#)

[What's This?](#) | [Don't Show](#)



Andrew Sullivan for The New York Times  
Sue McCahill of The Seeing Eye helped Jennifer Murray of Somers Point, N.J., adjust to a guide dog. [More Photos](#) »

withdraw from the world. Her husband, an Iraqi war veteran, was going through a difficult time, and life was a struggle. With the birth of their son, Liam, who is now 2, Ms. Murray said she realized she needed to become more independent to care for him.

"I realized the white cane wasn't cutting it," she said. "I was putting a lot of unspoken pressure on my husband and my son, which isn't fair to them."

That was when she decided to try to get a guide dog.

The mission of all guide dog schools is to create a team, pairing a blind person and a dog to give the person greater freedom and independence. It would seem to be an easy cause for fund-raising.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Andrew Sullivan for The New York Times  
A puppy gets personal attention at Fidelco. [More Photos](#) »

After all, most people melt when they see a puppy — a big marketing tool for these schools — and helping blind people lead better lives seems to be an unqualified good.

Yet if the cause is an easy sell, the work is not cheap. These schools need to raise money and engage volunteers on a very large scale to ensure they have enough resources to pay for the long, costly and often unsuccessful training of dogs. One guide dog takes about two years to train and costs a total of \$45,000 to \$60,000, covering everything from boarding a dog to extensive drilling by professional trainers in serving the needs of the blind to a weeklong period acclimating dog to recipient. And about 45 percent of dogs bred by the schools do not make the grade. Those that do are provided free to people who need them.

Beyond this, guide dog charities must compete in the wider contest for dollars among nonprofit organizations.

The Urban Institute, a research organization that focuses

on social and economic issues, estimates that 1.6 million such groups operate in America today, a 25 percent increase in the last decade.

"We're in competition with every charity and cause that's out there," said Eliot Russman, chief executive and executive director of Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation, in Bloomfield, Conn. "American Cancer Society, American Heart Society — everyone is out there telling compelling stories. There is a finite pool of money."

"We've got puppies, but Hole in the Wall Gang has dying children," he said. "What's more compelling? Our donors have to have confidence in management."

Mr. Russman came to Fidelco from the advertising world, where his clients included McDonald's and Xerox. And that experience has helped him sell potential donors on Fidelco, known for its German shepherds.

Bob Forrester, president and chief executive of the Newman's Own Foundation, which receives its money from the line of foods created by Paul Newman in 1982, and gives money to the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp, said the school fit with the foundation's mission of empowerment. "We want to help people to rise to whatever their potential might be if that potential is being thwarted by circumstances beyond their control," Mr. Forrester said.

He said that the foundation had given Fidelco \$450,000 since 2010 for a program that pairs guide dogs with blinded combat veterans. "We think broadly that it will be for nine dogs, but specifically we trust and respect our nonprofits to use it well and let us know," Mr. Forrester said.

One of the dogs the foundation's money paid to train is Xxon, a male German shepherd, who was paired with Michael Malarsie, an Air Force sergeant, a year to the day after he was nearly killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan in January 2010. He survived a severe injury that left him blind, though four others in his unit were killed.

In an interview last month before running a half-marathon in Hartford, Mr. Malarsie, 25, said that when he was recovering at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center he decided he wanted a guide dog. "I made a promise to myself that I wasn't going to let [blindness](#) slow me down," he said.

He has three children and said Xxon, with a sweet, gentle face not often associated with the breed, serves a more basic function: He helps him find his children when they hide from him.

Mr. Malarsie's wife, Jesse, whose first husband died in the same blast — and who met Mr. Malarsie when she and other widows of those killed visited survivors — said Xxon had been just as important for the family as for Mr. Malarsie. "He's not relying on me," she said. "I know he's safe and taken care of. I know he's not going to wander off. Xxon helped him find that independence and confidence."

•

Like many nonprofits, guide dog schools find big corporate donations hard to attract.

The Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind in Smithtown, N.Y., receives contributions from local businesses. One is Marchon, an eyewear company based on Long Island.

Donna Rollins, vice president of United States sales operations at Marchon, said the company became involved with the foundation when the economy faltered in 2008. Marchon was having a party for 5,000 people at a trade show in Las Vegas and decided that, given the times, it should have a charitable component, she said. "We had a band made up of eye doctors that was going to play, and we asked our partners to sponsor the band to benefit the Guide Dog Foundation," she said. That raised \$25,000. Instead of having an open bar, the company paid for the first two drinks and charged \$5 for additional ones, which raised another \$5,000.

While the company has continued to promote the foundation at its trade show, the amounts today are lower.

Jean Thomas, director of donor and public relations at The Seeing Eye Inc. in Morristown, N.J., which says it is the oldest guide dog school in the world (founded in 1929), said the school had had success in setting up lunches at companies to discuss what it does — dogs in tow — with employees. Still, she said, three-quarters of Seeing Eye's support comes from bequests and estate gifts, two areas that could be in trouble for all nonprofit groups as younger donors seek to give while they are alive. The Seeing Eye and Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael, Calif., each have endowments of more than \$200 million, but they are exceptions among the dozen guide dog schools in the United States. Most rely on individual donors to finance day-to-day operations. One way to raise money is to allow people to sponsor a dog, which entitles them to name it. At the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind, this costs \$6,000 per puppy.

"We have a lot of ways for donors to come to us," said Katherine Fritz, director of development at the Guide Dog Foundation, citing events like bike races, walks and runs that typically net about \$25,000. A recent golf tournament brought in \$185,000.

"A majority of our donations come through direct mail and are from smaller donors," she said. "But we had one woman who gave \$25 a year for 25 years and made a six-figure donation in her estate, and she didn't inform us about it."

•

One thing all of these schools share is the need for hundreds of volunteers a year to

answer phones, give tours or just walk dogs. They also need people to help socialize the dogs in their first year. Called puppy walkers or puppy raisers, these volunteers take the puppy home at eight weeks, teach it the basics like obedience and return it when it is about 14 months old.

Roger, 70, and Sheila Woodhour, 68, of Woodcliff Lake, N.J., are on their 29th German shepherd. Fourteen of the puppies they have taken for The Seeing Eye have become guide dogs. Yet Mrs. Woodhour still gets choked up over their first one, Dorsey.

"When I gave up Dorsey I thought no one was going to love her as much as I did," she said. But when she later saw Dorsey working, she changed her mind. "I loved the dog, but I didn't need the dog," she said. "I realized it gives them purpose."

She and other puppy walkers said the line they hear over and over from people is some version of, "I could never do that because I couldn't give the dog back."

Gail Horan, who raised Xxon as a puppy at her home in Farmington, Conn., said she and her husband cried all the way to Fidelco the day he was due back. She admitted that in the back of her mind she wondered if he might fail and come back to her.

"That does go through your mind," she said. "But you have to remember that's not why you did it. I wish there were words that could tell you how it made me feel when he passed" the training. These schools also need volunteers to talk about what they do, with the goal of bringing in more volunteers and donations.

Celebrities are part of this. Isabella Rossellini, the Italian actress and model, and Betty White, the comedian and sitcom star, both volunteer to help schools for guide dogs.

Ms. White said she sponsors a dog each year at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and offers to have lunch or dinner with the highest bidder in an auction each year for The Seeing Eye.

"It's a chance for me to say thank you for your support," she said. "It means we're all animal lovers, so we have no problem with conversation."

Those dinners have fetched \$5,500 to \$20,000 each over the last five years.

Ms. Rossellini has helped socialize 10 puppies for the Guide Dog Foundation. Seven have become working guide dogs.

She has also helped four dogs as they gave birth in her Long Island home. A fund-raiser there last summer after a litter was born raised \$6,000. "I decided everything I do, whether I give money or I volunteer, I have to be hands on," she said. "I see the rate of success. I see they're useful."

She added that, initially, "I was interested in dogs, but it also makes me feel good that those dogs go to help people who are visually impaired."

•

Criticism of guide dog charities often is based of the cost of training a dog and pairing it with a person. The failure rate for these animals is high. Dogs mainly wash out for health reasons — bad eyesight, hip or stomach problems — and for temperament, such as being too calm or too high-strung. And they can work for only eight to 10 years before they retire to become pets. A blind person could need six or seven dogs in a lifetime, which is a considerable expense.

"We have something people can see and understand, but it is certainly still a challenging fund-raising environment," Ms. Thomas of The Seeing Eye said. "One of the challenges is, what we do has a profound impact on about 265 people a year. If you're going up against a charity that feeds one million people a year, that's a tough comparison."

Philanthropic advisers point out, though, that while there are ways to affect more lives with the same dollars, donors might not get the same level of satisfaction out of doing it. "If where you're giving to doesn't reflect things that you're interested and passionate about, it won't be very rewarding for you," said Jim Coutre, partner at The Philanthropic Initiative in Boston. "Donors have to be honest with themselves. If providing clean water to a village in Africa doesn't resonate with them emotionally, they're not going to throw themselves into it."

He added, though, that people should still be discerning among different nonprofit organizations focusing on the same cause. "There are lots of different organizations that train these dogs, but they're not all equal," he said. "Some are going to have more impact."

The guide dog schools are addressing the high failure rate by improving breeding and training to reduce the number of animals that do not succeed and by finding other uses for them.

Mr. Russman said Fidelco dogs that do not make the cut sometimes work for the police departments in Connecticut and New York. A Fidelco-trained dog found a survivor at the World Trade Center site the day after the attack in 2001. A few years ago, Wells B. Jones, chief executive of the Guide Dog Foundation, said that the group saw a need for service dogs to help soldiers with traumatic injuries. Called America's Vet Dogs, the program has since expanded to help civilians who have served the country. He said the former representative Gabrielle Giffords, who was shot in the head while meeting with constituents outside a Tucson supermarket in 2011, uses a dog trained through the program to help with balance.

"We had dogs that weren't being used in the guide dog program that could contribute," he said. "We viewed that as an opportunity to meet a need using existing resources. Frankly it's turned out to have lots of benefits for us. And it's added to what we were doing with veterans."

•

Ed Bordley, a lawyer at the Justice Department in Washington who has been blind since age 10, said that after one winter navigating Harvard University as a freshman, he applied for a guide dog in 1976.

"You had these snow banks and people parking their cars on the sidewalks so there was just a little room to get around," he said. "The dog would find the path in the snow banks and walk you around the cars."

After graduating from Harvard Law School and embarking on a career that required him to travel, he appreciated the dog more. "I feel that there is a dignity to having a dog," said Mr. Bordley, who is on his fifth dog. "When you're using a cane, people grab you and direct you all the time."

The dogs also do things a cane or any GPS device could not do. Cliff Aaron, a lawyer who works in Lower Manhattan and lost his sight late in life from a hereditary condition, said his first dog, Alto, kept him from getting hurt the first day they went to work.

"I have to cross Church Street and Broadway every day," he said. "I'd been relying on my hearing or someone to help me. On my first day with him he stopped. I couldn't figure it out. Then I felt this wind go right past my face. I knew right away it was a bike messenger who blew the light."

Last month, after four weeks at The Seeing Eye, Ms. Murray was getting ready to go home with her dog, Fuchsia. "They've changed my life in ways they only think they know, but they don't know," she said, with Fuchsia curled up by her chair.

Yet she admitted to some trepidation in leaving the school and returning home to what

will be a very different life with her dog. She did not know how her life would be changed.

“When I lost my sight, I kind of just sheltered in a bit,” she said. “The first time I walked down the street with Fuchsia and I felt the wind on my face, I was smiling like a little kid.”

Tears of joy ran down from her closed eyes.

*Paul Sullivan donates to charities for the blind, including guide dog schools.*

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: November 8, 2013**

*An earlier version of this article misstated the first name of the wife of Michael Malarsie. She is Jesse Malarsie, not Julie.*

A version of this article appears in print on November 8, 2013, on page F1 of the New York edition with the headline: Precious Eyes.

SAVE E-MAIL SHARE



Try unlimited access to NYTimes.com for just 99¢. SEE OPTIONS »

**Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics**

Service Dogs and Other Animals

Philanthropy

Newman's Own

Disabilities

Ads by Google

[what's this?](#)

**2013 Best Skin Tighteners**

An Unbiased Review List of The Top Performing Skin Tighteners In 2013  
[www.SkinCareSearch.com/FaceLifting](http://www.SkinCareSearch.com/FaceLifting)

**Potty Train Dog in 6 Days**

This 4 Minute Exercise Teaches Your Dog To Potty Outside Every Time!  
[www.TheDogTrainingSecret.com](http://www.TheDogTrainingSecret.com)

**Find Local Animal Kennels**

Search Animal Kennels in Your Area Find Listings on YELLOWPAGES.COM.  
[yellowpages.com](http://yellowpages.com)

**INSIDE NYTIMES.COM**



BOOKS »



'Anything That Moves,' by Dana Goodyear

OPINION »

**Op-Ed: A Bend in the River**

The Horcón Tract was a chunk of territory that Americans forgot. Let's make sure we don't do that again in the name of border security.

HEALTH »



Runners Who Love Beer

ARTS »



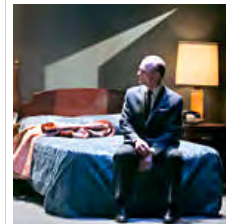
This Guy's No Puppy Hugger

OPINION »

**Is It Too Expensive to Be an Artist?**

Room for Debate asks what can be done when high rents and the demand for stability pose too great a challenge.

THEATER »



'The Jacksonian' Stars Ed Harris