

Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern and I'm your host.

Hello and welcome to Central Bark. Today, we have a really special episode. We're going to be talking about our K9 Buddy Program. And I am joined by two amazing people. I have Kelsey Gilbert, who is our K9 Buddy Program Manager, and Steve Gomes, who is a recipient of one of our fabulous K9 Buddies.

So, Miss Kelsey, let's start with you. You came to Guide Dogs, you were a guide dog instructor here at Guide Dogs for the Blind, and then you ran our residential programs, and now you're running the K9 Buddy Program. Can you tell us all a little bit about the K9 Buddy Program?

Kelsey Gilbert: Of course. Yeah. The K9 Buddy Program partners people who are blind or visually impaired with a companion dog. So these dogs come from our Guide Dog Training Program, or occasionally they come directly from our puppy raising homes and these dogs have been determined to be more suited to providing companionship rather than continuing in guide dog training, and this could be due to a variety of reasons.

As both of you are guide dog users or have been guide dog users in the past yourself, you know that being a guide dog is really complex work and requires the dog to have a high level of resilience. And while most of our dogs really thrive with that level of challenge, we find that some shine more in just connecting with their handler without that level of work responsibility. So this program is really special in that it allows us to honor all of our dogs' unique strengths and create more successful partnerships at GDB.

Theresa Stern: I love that idea that we're trying to find just the right job for all of our dogs. That's awesome. So Kelsey, I know the K9 Buddy Program has been around for a while, but you guys are starting a big expansion project. Can you tell us a little bit about what's new?

Kelsey Gilbert: Yeah. We're expanding geographically, which is really exciting. So historically, we've been serving K9 Buddy clients in the 10 western states and we're expanding that to serve clients all across the U.S. and ultimately, we'll be going into Canada as well so we'll be serving the same geographic region as we do our guide dog clients.

Theresa Stern: Amazing. Yeah.

Kelsey Gilbert: Yeah. No problem. In addition to that, we are also expanding the services that K9 Buddy clients will have access to. So there'll be enhanced services, which are going to be similar to what we provide our guide dog clients and that's what Guide Dogs for the Blind is so well known for is our services and follow-up care. So that will include access to veterinary financial assistance program, as well as follow-up support from our field staff and, as with all of our programs, there's

no cost to any of the K9 Buddy recipients so we're just so grateful to our donors for their support of these programs and our ability to provide them to people at no cost.

Theresa Stern: So tell me a little bit about who might be eligible to be partnered with a K9 Buddy dog.

Kelsey Gilbert: So this program started as a youth program and over the years, we've gotten more interest from adult clients and we really saw a need for these dogs to be available for adults as well, so this is part of our exciting expansion is that we are offering these dogs for both youth clients and youth recipients from five years old and up all the way through any age of adult clients as well.

Theresa Stern: That's great. That's great. Kelsey, can you tell us, is a K9 Buddy a service animal according to the Americans with Disabilities Act or not?

Kelsey Gilbert: That's a great question. While K9 Buddies do provide wonderful benefits to the clients that receive them, they are not classified as service dogs. They have not received task-specific training and that is what classifies a dog as a service dog under ADA.

Theresa Stern: Right. That makes sense. Right. Because a service dog under the ADA is really mitigating a disability, they've been taught a particular task to mitigate that disability and the K9 Buddy is just sort of an amazing animal to have around for companionship, exercise, confidence building and all that other good stuff.

Kelsey Gilbert: Exactly.

Theresa Stern: So, speaking of adult clients, I know Steve who's with us today. Why don't you tell us a little bit about how you found out about the K9 Buddy Program and you were placed with your K9 Buddy, Bill?

Steve Gomes: Okay. I am 67 years old and live in Southeast Denver, Colorado, and I have had guide dogs for 45 years, since I was 21. My dog died, Heidi, my fifth dog died July 20th of 2021 and I tried to return to get a new guide dog, and I was told that I had to learn how to use a cane. And I also have two cochlear implants, so without the cochlear implants, I am totally deaf.

The cochlear implants are very wonderful, but they don't allow for the accurate localization of traffic. In other words, it's very easy to think that the traffic that you have the parallel traffic so you can walk across the street and that does not work. I've always gotten assistance crossing streets and that used to be acceptable, but it's not anymore, I don't think, and I do have a sighted girlfriend and we go most places in her car and they determined that if I would not use the cane, would not learn how to use the cane, that I couldn't have a guy do it.

So I checked with other schools and it was the same thing because I think that's standard now. And I didn't know what to do. Dogs have been with me since my mother brought me home in the hospital as a baby.

Theresa Stern: Wow.

Steve Gomes: We've always had Labradors. And it's been very, very important to me to be able to get close and have contact with a dog. And I was without a dog and didn't know what to do. And I was told by schools, "Oh, just go get a rescue dog." So I tried that from Labrador Rescue and the dog I got, she was really very nice, but she was 10 months old and she was abandoned in Texas.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my goodness.

Steve Gomes: She was wild. She was really wild and I couldn't keep her because she would get away. She'd even get away from me.

Theresa Stern: Oh, wow.

Steve Gomes: And anyway, that was devastating too. So then I figured I just wouldn't be able to get a dog so I was just sitting at my desk here and wondering what I should do and I figured, "Why don't I call schools and tell them, 'Listen, I had a guide dog for 45 years, what can I do? I need a dog. I need to have a dog for company.'?"

I got through a few schools and they told me to go get a rescue and to go on the waiting list and other things that I knew wouldn't work so I got to your school and they said, "Hey, you know, we just had this brand new program called the Buddy Program." And within about two months, I had Bill. Nice and simple, no problems, no doctors' notes, no investigation. Michelle [inaudible 00:08:39] from your school.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, one of our field service managers. Yes.

Steve Gomes: She's the field service manager for Colorado. She came down to do a video of my living quarters and then where I would take the dog to relieve himself.

Theresa Stern: Okay. Great.

Steve Gomes: But within no time, June 1st, I got Bill at 10:00 in the morning.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my goodness.

Steve Gomes: And I've been back to my normal self. I have a do. Guide dogs, they aren't just guide dogs. They do so many other things. They let you know if something's not right in the house. They can even cook the turkey on Thanksgiving. Well, no.

Theresa Stern: They might eat half of it, Steve, I don't know.

Steve Gomes: Oh, yeah.

Theresa Stern: So assuming you had some time where you talked to Kelsey a little bit and so that she could get to know you so she knew what would be a great match for you, and I know you have a very clever nickname for Kelsey. Can you tell us what that is?

Steve Gomes: Okay. I told Kelsey that I wanted a love bucket. A real loving dog. It wasn't long before she called and said, "Steve, I found a love bucket for you." So I have named her Love Bucket Control.

Theresa Stern: I love that. So when you were looking for a special dog for Steve here, what kinds of things did you take into consideration that really made you feel like Bill was the one?

Kelsey Gilbert: Yeah, the matching process is not something that just applies to guide dogs, but also for the K9 Buddies as well, so we want to consider the applicant's lifestyle, their routine, what they do on the day-to-day. Also what they're looking for in a dog, too, in terms of personality traits and that sort of thing.

So knowing that Steve really wanted a love bucket and a dog that was just going to really be by his side at all times, just be kind of that constant companion, we were looking for a dog that that's just their natural tendency and we really found that in Bill. So a lot of these dogs, they're just such wonderful dogs. They have great temperaments, they're so sweet and caring and they just want to be near their person and that makes them the perfect candidate to be K9 Buddies.

Theresa Stern: I love it. I love it. So back to you, Steve. How did it feel the first time Michelle, I think, showed up with Bill at your door? What was that like for you?

Steve Gomes: It was very, very exciting. Just imagined that I wasn't going to be allowed to have a dog from the schools. And when I got that rescue, I thought all these years of me having my dog, I knew how to train a dog. I thought I knew how and I didn't.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Puppies are hard. 10 months old, that's hard. And now she's rehomed, right? Dolly's been rehomed to a nice place.

Steve Gomes: She's got a couple acres of land up there to run around on, she's got dog brothers and sisters and everything worked out very well.

Theresa Stern: So tell us a little bit about Bill and his personality. Where Dolly was kind of wild, what's Bill like?

Steve Gomes: Bill is a very, very... He's three years old. He's a very, very gentle dog. He is just very, very good. He keeps his head on. When I brush him every day, I squat down and he'll keep his head on my left knee and I brush him with both hands. He'll keep his chin.

Theresa Stern: Aw, sweet. He is a love bucket.

Steve Gomes: Oh, yeah. And he... I'm a love bucket too. I mean, I'm always rubbing my face on his fur. It's great.

Theresa Stern: That's great. I think what's so great about it is having Bill and going for walks and it sounds like it's really, after having a guide dog for so many years, having that companionship and reason to get out and go for walks, that's also a great way to maintain a healthy lifestyle too.

So we got a great story from Steve, who talked about the difference that his K9 Buddy has made in his life as an adult. Tell me a little bit about what maybe somebody who's a child who's visually impaired might get out of the program.

Kelsey Gilbert: Yeah, that's one of my favorite things about this program is really how it can fulfill so many different needs for different people at multiple stages of life. And so, like you said, we heard from Steve about how Bill keeps him active and out there and feeling confident having a dog by his side and walking in his community.

And for youth, it can provide a lot of benefits as well. So it can help youth learn about dog behavior, basic dog care, basic dog obedience. And these can all be really helpful skills if that individual wants to later apply for a guide dog. They really come in having the skillset already of understanding those dog basics. And for some of our youth applicants, they have never had a family pet before, so they've never had a dog so they're learning all of this firsthand.

And then even for individuals that don't end up applying for a guide dog in the future, they still benefit from learning that responsibility and gaining the confidence that can come from having a K9 Buddy by their side. So there's really so many benefits, both for the youth applicants and for adults as well.

Theresa Stern: Yes. I have always thought, "God, I wish that K9 Buddy Program was around when I was a kid." Because I think that would've just been just so amazing, to have the opportunity to take care of a dog and really, like you said, learn some of the leadership skills that it takes to be part of a team of a dog and a person. So I just love this program and how it can really change people's lives in many different ways.

So Kelsey, you've worked in many different roles here at Guide Dogs for the Blind. Tell me, really, what's your favorite part about this K9 Buddy Program?

Kelsey Gilbert: So I really love that the K9 Buddy Program can just meet someone where they are, and that could be early on in life, so the youth can really benefit from this being an entry point to Guide Dogs for the Blind and learning more about our wonderful dogs and the companionship and support and confidence that they can provide having a K9 Buddy by their side, which can ultimately assist them in their pursuit of getting a guide dog in the future.

And then we also have many guide dog users that have been long-term guide dog users and they've had dogs by their side for many years, as Steve told us about earlier. And so for some of those folks, they might be at a point in their life where independent travel isn't really part of their routine anymore, but they're still benefiting from the companionship of having a dog and that connection to GDB and to our community that's just so important and something that I think really makes our organization special is that sense of community that we can provide as well.

Theresa Stern: Well, the program is very lucky to have an amazing leader like you, Kelsey.

Kelsey Gilbert: Thanks, Theresa.

Theresa Stern: Your program sounds amazing. Can you tell folks how they can learn more about it and maybe apply for a K9 Buddy dog?

Kelsey Gilbert: Yeah, you can visit our website, we have all the most up-to-date information there and you'll be able to apply and then we'll be connected with our admissions department as well to move you through that application process.

Theresa Stern: That's great. That's great. And I love that it's for adults as well as kids now, and I think these dogs just make a huge difference in the whole family's life so thank you for doing the work you're doing, Kelsey.

Kelsey Gilbert: Yeah, you're welcome.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. And thank you so much for joining us today, Steve, and sharing your story and give Bill the love bucket a great big kiss from me.

Steve Gomes: I will.

Theresa Stern: For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, please visit [guidedogs.com](http://guidedogs.com).