

My Eyes Have a Cold, Wet Nose

an interview with Curt Landtroop

Curt Landtroop, a bond portfolio manager at the General Motors Investment Management Corporation, is a member of the Advisory Board for Puppies Behind Bars. He weighed two and one half pounds when he was born several months premature and developed a condition called retrolental fibroplasia (RLF) from receiving too much oxygen in the incubator, which saved his life but resulted in total blindness. Married to a sighted woman, he lives on the Hudson and has a five-year-old son. He does much of his business on the telephone, aided by special adapted technology that has enabled him to use a computer and has provided voice and Braille access to market and data services such as Bloomberg and Dow Jones Telerate.

But his greatest boon is not technological, it is Marcie, a six-year-old yellow Lab, his fourth guide dog, who has been with him for four years. Mr. Landtroop talked with Puppies Behind Bars about how important a well-trained guide dog is, and gave some insights into the way a guide dog and a blind person work together.

PBB: What is Marcie's personality like?

Landtroop: She is the first female dog I've had. Generally speaking, I get males, because they are a little stronger, but even though Marcie is small (she's only about 68 pounds, while I am six feet tall and weigh 185 pounds), she has a lot of zest. She loves to work all the time, seven days a week, which is good for me because I am very active. During the week, her work schedule is demanding in that we commute three and a half hours daily. For her recreation, I run her in the woods on weekends with my son. Also, at work, I take off her harness and leash and frequently my colleagues play fetch with her by throwing a ball in the trading room.

PBB: So even though she's small, she's spiritually the perfect dog for you?

Landtroop: Yes, she is a perfect fit spiritually and even her size is a perfect fit. It's a funny thing, when you go to a guide-dog school to get your dog, the first day there, your pace of walk, balance, and strength are evaluated by the training department in order to match you up with the dog that is best suited to you. The next day, everyone gets presented with their dogs, and it used to be a kind of status thing that the bigger the dog, the better. But for me that has changed to where I think 'the smaller, the better', because it is a lot easier to get a smaller dog on buses and planes, and into taxicabs. Yet I knew a 105-pound woman whose guide dog was almost as large as she was. Despite its size, the dog had a docile personality and they made a great team. It's amazing how often the training staff gets it just right in combining the person and the dog to create a great traveling unit.

PBB: How long did it take you and Marcie to get used to each other?

Landtroop: A month or two. Normally, you train at the guide-dog school for two to three weeks after you have been matched with your dog. You and your dog are in a class of about 12, and you live at the school while you are training. You get up with them, take them out in the morning, go everywhere with them--the whole bit. Every time you get a dog, even if you have had guide dogs before, you go through this training period. With Marcie, the school [Guiding Eyes for the Blind] gave me home training, where the trainer comes to your home and works with you on an individual basis, so it only takes about one week. For example, on the second day I had Marcie, we went into the city together, so the one week of training is very intensive.

PBB: How does it work? How does Marcie know where you want to go?

Landtroop: I direct her. The person directs by using hand signals and by using his body. A widely held misperception is that the dogs make decisions, especially as to when to cross a street. This is not true. Dogs are color blind; they don't see lights. I, or other people who are blind and use a dog or a cane or whatever, listen to traffic. When traffic starts on the street that is parallel to you, then you know you can cross. One of the beauties of having a guide dog is that if you tell a dog to 'go,' and there's a problem of some sort (for example, a car you didn't hear coming, or a cliff that's straight ahead of you), the dog will not go because it will not walk you into danger. It's called 'intelligent disobedience.'

As a human, when this happens, you are supposed to figure out there is a problem and take appropriate action, such as walking the dog in a different direction.

PBB: Is Marcie always with you or can she go off with someone else?

Landtroop: At home, if my wife, Diane, and my son, Zach, want to take her for a walk, she goes off, but other than that, she is usually with me. If I don't need her, she can do whatever she wants. I know she is well-trained enough that she'd never present a problem. I don't ever have problems with her at work, either, except that I did have to send out an office memo asking my colleagues not to feed her treats or entice her in any way with food, because that is bad training and could cause problems.

PBB: What would you like to tell us that we haven't asked?

Landtroop: The bond between a blind person and his or her guide dog is unique. When you lose a dog, it's like losing a very close friend. You go through so many experiences with your dog. For example, with my dog Flame, one of Marcie's predecessors, I particularly remember a terrific blizzard in New York in 1979 or 1980. At the time, I was working at the General Motors building in midtown and living on 65th and York Avenue, and to get to work, people had to walk through the narrow passageways that had been dug on the sidewalks, with snow up to the lampposts because the drifts were so high.



There wasn't room in the narrow passageways for both me and Flame, so we had to climb over the drifts. It was a once in a lifetime experience.

Flame was a very special dog. In the 1970s, before I got married, CBS did a story on me and, since I was in the investment business, the reporter offhandedly asked if Flame had a nose for money. As a matter of fact he did: one night we were on our way to a bar and he sniffed and sniffed around on the sidewalk and picked up a \$100 bill and handed it to me. He was always retrieving things and handing them to me. For instance, he once went up to the conveyor belt at an airport, identified my luggage, and grabbed it with his mouth.

By providing safe and effective mobility, a guide dog allows for greater confidence, which leads to a greater sense of empowerment and fulfillment. There is a closeness to your guide dog that is hard to imagine. It doesn't take away from my closeness to my wife and son, but there is such a selfless giving on the part of these dogs. Marcie really enjoys what she does. Even if she is playing ball, as soon as I pick up her harness, she stops playing immediately, comes running over, and leaps into her harness. She loves her work.