

Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation, Inc.

103 Vision Way
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Wilton, CT 06897

Fidelco.org



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Spring 2021

Fidelco News

Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation

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Thinking over the past year, adaptability, resilience, and innovation are some words that come to mind. We're all looking at a more optimistic future; it's spring, vaccine distribution is accelerating, there are new puppies and more guide dog placements happening. Another word is joy; our amazing volunteers are raising terrific young dogs. The Fidelco staff remains totally focused on delivering beautiful, hard-working, smart German Shepherd guide dogs to clients who are visually impaired and blind. Every placement is a celebration.

We rapidly adopted new technology at the start of the pandemic, and now we have much wider and stronger communications channels. Puppy classes via video may not be as much fun as playing with a puppy in person, but they're incredibly effective and yield some hilarious recordings. We figured out how to socialize puppies at a younger age which resulted in better adaptability, and how to concentrate placement training to shorten the time required. We also learned how to provide conversations virtually for large groups of clients to expand knowledge for all of us. We're a stronger organization now.

Please join us at Fidelco.org for the stories of our incredible clients, volunteers, and staff. Please also share your thoughts. We have learned so much in the last year and we're hungry for more.

Our next challenge is enhancing the awareness of Fidelco. A group of puppies training in public is a terrific way to attract interest, but not viable at the moment. Please consider contributing to Fidelco, whether through volunteer activities or financial support. We need to increase awareness of our organization, continue to serve as a valuable investment for organizations and continue to fulfill our mission.

Stay well and safe.

Karen C. Tripp
Chief Executive Officer



Volunteer Puppy Raisers play a vital role in the development of Fidelco German Shepherds as they grow into becoming guide dogs. From eight weeks until about 14–16 months old, puppies live with families who provide a loving home, training, and socialization to prepare them for future guide dog work.

After ten years as a Volunteer Puppy Raiser, Barbara DeSouza's dedication and enthusiasm haven't wavered. "Puppy raising is great. As soon as I give the puppy back to Fidelco for formal guide training, I say OK, I'm ready for another puppy to raise." Barbara is

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currently raising Fidelco pup, "Frankie," who lives with her two Fidelco career-change dogs, "Ultan" and "Hope," family rescue dog, "MaCree," and cat, "Wynter."

Barbara has a family member who is blind. When her son, Dillon, was 12 and looking for a community service project, he said, "I want to raise a guide dog for people like Uncle Joe." In 2011, Barbara and Dillon welcomed Fidelco puppy, "Hope," the first of eight Fidelco puppies raised by the DeSouzas over the past ten years.

In high school Dillon played multiple sports, and Barbara would take the Fidelco puppies to games and practices to further the socialization process. She shares, "I love the whole community aspect of Fidelco. Many of the volunteers I have met in the Saturday Puppy Raiser classes have become my friends. And I love talking to people about Fidelco Guide Dogs—I always encourage others to become involved.

"Some people say to me, 'I could never be a Puppy Raiser because I couldn't give the puppy up.' I tell them when the puppies are 16 months old—because these German Shepherd Dogs learn so fast and are so smart—you know they are ready to move on. They want more and are ready for the next level of work and training to become guide dogs."

Dillon is now a 22-year-old college student. With a quieter household, combined with social-distancing due to COVID-19, Barbara has found creative ways to socialize Frankie and safely expose her to various people, sights, sounds, and environments that prepare her for future guide dog training.

As an Assistant Attorney General for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Barbara drove to her office each day prior to the coronavirus pandemic. On


Fridays, she would bring the Fidelco puppy she was raising with her to work, to expose it to an office environment, taking elevators, navigating sidewalks, and crossing city streets.

In March 2020, she shifted to working from home, and Frankie arrived in June. The pandemic routine now includes training to help the puppy understand when it's time for Barbara to begin and end her workday, and when it is time for Frankie to rest, train, or play—all important manners and skills for future guide work.

Barbara takes Frankie out into the world in small and safe ways—to the grocery store, home improvement center, and outdoor shopping and recreational areas. There are lots of hikes and walks. Barbara is especially grateful to have a team of neighborhood puppy partners: three sisters from the family next door. The girls have "Frankie Fridays," when they join Barbara and Frankie for walks around the neighborhood after school.

Barbara says that it's gratifying to know that puppies she and Dillon raised are now working as Fidelco guide dogs for people who are blind. Barbara says, "You remember this goofy, fluffy

puppy you raised—and you now see him expertly and calmly leading his partner through a crowd of rowdy people in a busy subway station, escorting her securely up the stairs and safely outside. I've seen another pup we raised—now a Fidelco guide dog—who accompanies her partner on camping trips as they explore and hike challenging trails together with confidence and companionship."

Barbara has given eight Fidelco puppies the gift of a great start, and she is looking forward to raising more. Everyone at Fidelco is so grateful to all volunteers who pour their energy and time into raising and caring for puppies, forming the foundation for trusted guide dog partnerships. 




Scan QR code to watch Barbara's video



Virtual Dog Days of Summer sparks passion in young entrepreneur

Fifth-grade student Grace Miller combined her innovative and creative ideas, her compassionate and giving spirit, and her love of dogs to create Ziller Dog Supplies. Grace and two friends started the business in late 2020 and have already made and sold several dog blankets and dozens of dog toys, in a variety of sizes, ranging from \$1 to \$7 each. Proceeds from sales are used to buy supplies to make more blankets and toys, which Grace donates to her local Humane Society and to dog shelters in her relatives' communities.

Grace's venture was inspired by her participation in last summer's Virtual Dog Days of Summer Program. Grace's mom, Melissa, works with Fidelco client Bill DeMaio. After Bill told Melissa and Grace about Fidelco's Dog Days of Summer Program, Grace signed up. During one of the activities, Grace learned to make blankets and toys for dogs. She gave two of the first fleece blankets she made to Bill's guide dog, "Lyric," and his retired Fidelco guide dog, "Izaak."

Grace has already made and donated over 40 dog toys to the Newington Humane Society and to a dog shelter in Florida. She says one of her favorite parts of running Ziller Dog Supplies is seeing pictures of the shelter dogs and puppies playing with the toys she has made and donated. With Grace's compassion for helping dogs in shelters and her entrepreneurial spirit, she is using her many gifts to give back. 

Virtual Dog Days of Summer Children's Program



July 12 - August 6

Virtual Dog Days of Summer is a fun-filled program for children of all ages that incorporates a variety of engaging hands-on and "live" virtual activities with Fidelco's trainers, puppy technicians, and other special guests.



Scan QR code for Virtual Dog Days webpage

Dog-friendly garden plants

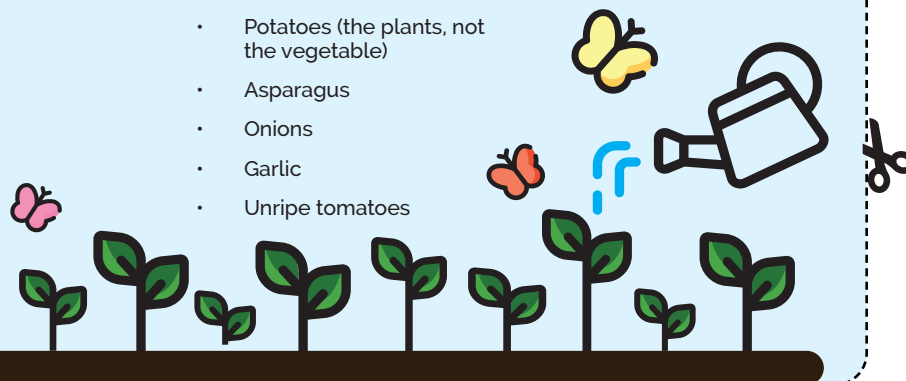
We wanted to share a list of some dog-friendly plants to consider for your garden.

For those of you who are looking to add some color and beauty to the garden while keeping your furry friends safe, you may want to consider the following plants:

- Garden Marigolds
- Snapdragons
- Polka Dot Plants
- Sunflowers
- Nasturtium
- Jasmine
- Roses
- Zinnias
- Petunias
- Pansies
- Fennel
- Thyme
- Basil
- Dill
- Rosemary
- Cilantro

The following can be harmful to dogs::

- Rhubarb
- Broccoli
- Potatoes (the plants, not the vegetable)
- Asparagus
- Onions
- Garlic
- Unripe tomatoes





One man's journey to independence

Robert, with his wife, Susan, and "Zoe"

Robert Heidenberg, president and CEO of Heidenberg Properties Group and member of Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation's Board of Directors, is partner to "Zoe," his first Fidelco guide dog. Retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary retinal disease, gradually caused his vision to diminish over time.

Founded in 2013, his company develops, owns, and manages shopping centers, malls, and retail properties and undertakes redevelopment projects throughout the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest. Robert was also a co-founder of a

predecessor real estate company that acquired and developed shopping centers and retail properties. Prior to becoming involved in real estate, Robert briefly practiced law in New York City.

He is actively involved in his community, serving as first vice president of his local synagogue. He is a board member of VISIONS/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired in New York City (a rehabilitation and social services organization) and the Foundation Fighting Blindness.

Robert and his wife, Susan, an interior designer, have established the Robert and Susan Heidenberg Investigative Research Fund for Ocular Gene Therapy to support research leading to clinical trials in retinal gene therapy. They have also endowed a fellowship to support a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design.

The beginning of his vision loss occurred when Robert was a child. However, he excelled in several sports especially golf and skiing,

received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania and Juris Doctorate from the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law of Yeshiva University, and continued driving until his early 40s. When he could no longer travel independently, Robert relied on "somebody's hand or shoulder" to continue his active life.

At a conference sponsored by the Foundation Fighting Blindness, Robert spent time with a Fidelco client and realized that partnering with a guide dog could be a way for him to regain his independence. He was particularly interested

in Fidelco's In-community Placement training model. This enables clients to train in their home communities rather than traveling to a residential training facility. It allows for incorporating home and work routines into training.

He applied to Fidelco and in June 2017 was accepted into the program. Four months later in October 2017, Fidelco Placement Specialist Peter and guide dog "Zoe" arrived to begin the three-week training process.


Robert describes the initial stages of training as a "frightening and difficult journey."

He was accustomed to being the decision-maker and now was learning a new and challenging set of skills, including placing trust in Zoe. He says that at the end of each day, he was "physically and emotionally exhausted." He credits Peter

“Zoe is a gift. I never really knew or appreciated, when I started on this journey, that my life and perspective would change so profoundly.”

with giving him both the training expertise and emotional support needed to continue. Robert says he slowly recognized that learning to work with a guide dog was like learning a new sport, and he began to relax more (both physically and mentally) while holding Zoe's harness, and their movements became more fluid.

Robert and Zoe are now a successful guide dog team. He describes Zoe as his "hall of fame" guide dog and says she is "intelligent, tenacious, and focused" while working but also very sweet and loved by the entire family. "Zoe is a gift. I never really knew or appreciated,

when I started on this journey, that my life and perspective would change so profoundly. Zoe has given me independence. She has empowered me to do things on my own that I long ago gave up...I feel like she and I are one." 

Chill out with your dog

Here is an easy-to-make treat for your dog to chill out with and enjoy in the warmer weather:

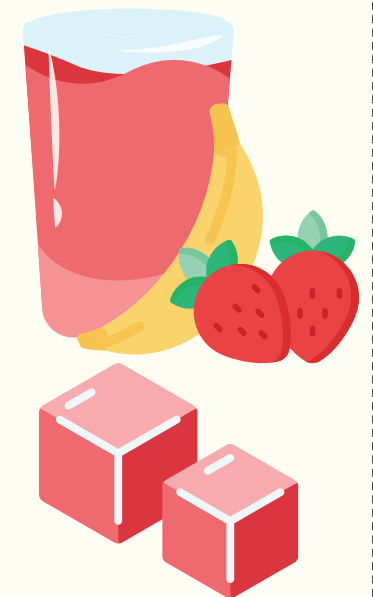
Strawberry Smoothie dog treat from IrresistiblePets.com

Ingredients:

- One banana
- Six strawberries

Instructions:

1. Remove the stems from the strawberries and rinse.
2. Peel the banana and cut into three pieces.
3. Blend the bananas and strawberries until smooth and free of chunks.
4. Pour the mixture into an ice cube tray and freeze until hard.
5. Serve to your dog!





A shared and special bond

Connie with "Xola"

"This extremely smart, dedicated German Shepherd Dog guides and protects you, while giving unconditional love that strengthens you in other aspects of your life," says Fidelco client Connie Hornick. Originally from New York and a retired social worker, she now lives in Ohio with her husband, Steve. Connie lost her vision due to congenital glaucoma.

While living in New York, and working as an Outreach Director, Connie decided a guide dog would help her keep up with her job and enable her to fulfill her desire to travel and live life more independently. "I loved dogs and had pets since being married, so receiving a guide dog seemed a natural choice."

Connie was partnered with her first Fidelco guide dog, "Osha," in 2000. Her second guide dog,

"Bridgette," retired as her guide at the age of ten and then became a beloved pet. Her third and current Fidelco guide dog is "Xola." Connie's guide dogs have given her increased confidence, enabling her to travel more easily and safely.


Connie describes the special connections she has had with each of her guide dogs. "When I was younger, I didn't understand how any dog could be a 'successor' to Osha. I now understand that while each guide comes with training skills, each is unique and has its own personality. When you and the guide connect, it becomes a special bond, like no other. You get freedom, independence, and so much more."

There have been bittersweet transitions along the journey with guide dogs. Connie shares, "Xola came to me when I still had my 12-year-old dog, Bridgette. I wondered how Bridgette and Xola would get along, but they both were loving and happy German Shepherd Dogs and did great together. At the

end of that December, Bridgette passed. Besides staying close to Bridgette while she was sick, Xola also met my emotional needs—putting her head in my lap and licking my tears. This is not a guide dog's job, but it is the unconditional love everyone seeks, and I had it."

While the coronavirus pandemic has restricted travel, it has not limited Connie's level of activity. Xola accompanies her on walks to the gym, the store, and other errands and outings in her community. "Xola is a great guide, maneuvering us through situations that would be impossible for me to manage without her."

Expressing her gratitude for the volunteers, staff, and donors who support Fidelco guide dogs and clients, she says, "I am empowered and able to do

things with my guide dog. I can't imagine being without my guide dogs. The dogs seamlessly know when you are scared, sad, or need a laugh. In return, they expect to be cared for and loved, making you vulnerable in the best of ways. This special bond can only happen because there are so many caring people who donate, raise, train, and work with the potential guides so that when they are placed, people who are blind can live and thrive." 

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Join The Shepherd Club

Spring is about renewal, change, and making a difference. By joining The Shepherd Club, Fidelco's monthly giving program, you'll make a world of difference to our clients and dogs.

As a Shepherd Club member, you'll enjoy:

- Exclusive access to live footage of puppies in Fidelco's Pup House via the "Puppy Cam."
- Quarterly updates detailing how you are making a difference.
- Recognition in future issues of this newsletter!

To learn more, contact Mark McGrath, Philanthropic Relationship Director
e: mmcgrath@fidelco.org | t: 959.282.2181



Scan to visit The Shepherd Club's Wall of Monthly Donors



Appreciating the heroes—our kennel staff

They are there 365 days a year, keeping Fidelco German Shepherd Dogs healthy, happy, and safe—this describes the tireless, hands-on work of the six members of Fidelco’s kennel staff. While their work often goes unseen, these dedicated people ensure that each of the dogs in their care receives the physical and emotional support essential to their well-being. Staff members come from different backgrounds that include prior Fidelco volunteer work, certification as a veterinary assistant, dog breeding, and doggie daycare work. But they all share one common trait—a love of dogs—and support of Fidelco’s mission. “Their job is to be the best advocates for the dogs by making sure all their needs are met, so Fidelco can provide our clients with happy and healthy guide dogs,” says Kennel Manager Lori McClain-Russak.


Each day, members of the kennel staff perform a variety of tasks to provide the dogs with a positive and enriching experience. This includes providing them with appropriate toys and playing music and audiobooks throughout the kennels, so that the dogs are soothed and learn to expect new noises. Staff members also regularly assist other members of Fidelco’s dog care team—those in the Puppy Raiser Department, trainers, and Veterinary-Medical Department staff.

They work with the Puppy Raiser Department to ensure that pups coming in for brief kennel stays have a positive first experience, provide trainers with daily observations of the health of each

dog after early morning checks, reinforce basic training skills, and assist Veterinary-Medical staff in handling dogs undergoing X-rays or vaccinations.

For puppies coming in for their first kennel stay at six-months old, kennel staff help with coordinating pen assignments, including the placement of cots and toys, and providing special treats when they arrive. These young pups are given long walks during the day and special attention in the evening. Staff members check dogs in-training each morning (“wellness rounds”) to ensure they are in good health before working with their trainers, dispense medications, provide treats after dogs’ daily training, and give kenneled dogs their meals.

On weekends, kennel staff walk all kenneled dogs and provide enriching playtimes. Staff are also responsible for the care of boarded female dogs in heat and bathing and grooming guide dogs prior to client placement. To ensure that Fidelco’s kennels are maintained at the highest level of cleanliness, kennel staff clean and disinfect all indoor and outdoor kennels daily and ensure that clean towels and bowls are always available.

Members of Fidelco’s kennel staff can be depended on to do whatever is needed for the well-being of the dogs in their care and are always advocates for the dogs and Fidelco’s mission. 


Aetna helps champion the Fidelco mission

The Aetna Foundation’s commitment to Fidelco Guide Dogs spans more than two decades with the Foundation providing considerable financial and volunteer support. Earlier this year, the Foundation graciously invited members of Fidelco’s leadership team to participate in the Georgetown University McDonough School of Business New Strategies Program demonstrating their continued commitment to the long-term success of our organization.

Fidelco Vice President Richard Pummell remarked, “Participation in the New Strategies



Program exceeded my expectations. Every session focused on meaningful and topical issues facing not-for-profit organizations today, and the facilitators were incredibly informed and engaging. There are many takeaways from the program that will benefit short- and long-term strategy within Fidelco.”

We are so grateful for our partnership with the Aetna Foundation and for the countless opportunities this partnership has provided. 

Coming Soon!

If you’re in the New York City area, be sure to check out the AKC Museum of the Dog. Not only does it consistently offer wonderful collections and exhibitions celebrating the role of dogs in our society, but Fidelco will be featured in an upcoming collaboration! Details to come.

