

Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation, Inc.

103 Vision Way
Bloomfield, CT 06002

Fidelco.org



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Fall 2024

FidelcoNews

Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation



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Watching the amazing abilities of Olympic and Paralympic athletes every four years is exhilarating, motivating, mind-boggling! The same can be said every day watching Fidelco German Shepherd guide dogs. As they grow and put everything they have into learning to help people who are blind, it's just simply, beautiful.

In this edition, you'll find a great story on Fidelco's Puppy Olympics, which takes place every year. Puppies at all ages compete in a number of categories and proudly make the hundreds of people watching laugh, applaud, and tear up. Their older siblings are working with people from every walk of life, providing increased safety and mobility and love. You'll also find stories of newer clients, as well as Fidelco volunteers and our fantastic Lions Clubs and Suburban Subaru supporters.

Fidelco succeeds because of this community—our staff, clients, volunteers, puppy raising families, donors, and sponsors. Thousands of people contribute to each Fidelco guide dog's success from birth, to training, to the average ten years of support they provide to each client.

We're very grateful for all of you.

My best,

Karen C. Tripp
Chief Executive Officer



Client Story: John Lowery and "Jasper"

Fidelco client John Lowery is a decorated military veteran who served in three branches of the U.S. military and was deployed overseas numerous times during the first Gulf War and in other operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Europe. He served ten years as a Staff Sergeant in the Marine Corps, three and a half years as a Specialist in the Army, and ten years as a Staff Sergeant in the U.S. Air Force.

John first experienced vision loss when he started finding it difficult to see at night. He recalls there were years at a time when the

progression seemed to stop, until his vision deteriorated rapidly. John was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa and was medically retired from the U.S. Air Force in 2012.

He recalls this period in his life as a very challenging one. "It was all at once. It wasn't gradual. I could no longer do things I had always done. I went from being active in the military, and had spent my life fishing, rock climbing, and riding motorcycles off-road. Within a year, things had happened so quickly. It's hard to get your head around when it's not your choice. It made it easier at the time to surrender my autonomy and independence to my wife."

When John's wife passed away unexpectedly in 2021 in the middle of the pandemic, he made the decision to move to a less remote area of Maine to be closer to family, including his two sons, stepdaughter, and stepson.

John was soon contacted by Michelle Mason of the Maine Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The VA Visual Impairment Service provides a comprehensive program for veterans who are visually impaired. "Michelle came out once a week, taught me organization skills, how to use adaptive technology, and orientation and mobility, including how to use a cane. Michelle's willingness to come to my home and help me during this time of uncertainty and restrictions was amazing."

As John developed adaptive skills and progressed through orientation and mobility training, Michelle told him about guide dog organizations and how guide dogs help people who are blind experience increased mobility and independence. "Fidelco stood out for me because of its connections with the veteran community, and because Fidelco trains and places German Shepherd Dogs," John shares. "I previously had German Shepherd Dogs as pets and had worked in the military with them as working dogs, so Fidelco was a natural fit."

John remembers the rigorous application process to receive a Fidelco guide dog. He says, "Now I understand why. You're getting

a highly trained animal and an unparalleled support system. I had to be able to demonstrate I have the tools, mobility, and willingness to be a responsible guide dog user."

"Fidelco tailored the placement and training experience for me, coming to my home and training in my community." Fidelco Trainer and Placement Specialist Becky Cook was "the perfect fit... Becky understood everything I had gone through, and she was firm with me at the right times during training. The hardest thing for me was to relinquish control and totally

put my trust in Jasper. Becky understood my military mindset and that someone like me, having a little bit of sight, my first instinct was to second-guess the dog. Becky taught me how to trust Jasper."

"When I got Jasper, my muscle memory had to come back. When you're losing your vision, even walking with a cane, your stride changes. I had started to

shuffle, because I didn't want to trip or fall into a pothole. I was embarrassed to ask for help."

As placement training progressed, John says he noticed changes. "I was lengthening my stride and walking more quickly with Jasper. Becky helped me get back out there comfortably doing things by myself. I am now able to handle a 95-pound German Shepherd guide dog who loves to work, and I'm physically able to keep up with him."

It's been almost three years since John was matched with Jasper, and he's out in the world again. For the past two years, John has participated in a Brazilian jiu-jitsu program. He and Jasper share their home with a pet corgi and a cat. "There's a lot of land, which is great for Jasper to run around and get a lot of exercise. We do basic obedience every day to keep him sharp," says John. In addition to bus and train trips, John's future travel plans include a trip to visit family in Scotland.

John is a dedicated advocate for blinded veterans, sharing messaging so more veterans are aware of the guide dog benefits available to them. "I am advocating for there to be fewer restrictions so more veterans qualify for guide dogs." He says many veterans have financial constraints, and the VA provides a veterinary health benefit and other benefits in support of service dogs.

John is also eager to share about his partnership with Jasper and the benefits of guide dogs, including with schools and youth groups. He is a proponent of expanding public awareness so people understand that when the harness is on, a guide dog is working and should not be distracted.


"When I'm out with Jasper, people notice me. People will stop and look, because Jasper's so beautiful and intelligent, they can tell he's working. In crowds, Jasper uses his head like an oar, gently moving people out of the way so we can get through. Even with PTS, I'm getting

more comfortable with people noticing me, thanks to Jasper."

Fidelco stood out for me because of its connections with the veteran community, and because Fidelco trains and places German Shepherd Dogs.



John and "Jasper"

"I know what it took to bring Jasper to me, and how much goes into training a guide dog at his level. I can't thank Fidelco enough, including Becky and Jasper's Puppy Raisers," says John. "There's a responsibility that comes with having a guide dog. I know I have this amazing animal. I love and trust him." 



Janet Gerster and "Trooper"

Client Story: Janet Gerster and "Trooper"

"I thought about getting a guide dog for a long time," says first-time Fidelco guide dog user Janet Gerster. "For most of my life, I had enough vision to travel independently."

Janet's vision continued to deteriorate due to retinitis pigmentosa, and she began using a cane. The cane was helpful, but issues arose during her commute to work as a recruiter at the University of Pittsburgh. "When you use a cane, you are reactive. I have fairly good cane skills, but a cane can only tell you what's three feet in front of you."

As the days grew shorter in November in Pittsburgh, Janet noticed a discernible difference in her level of confidence traveling home from work. It was during one of her daily commutes on the bus that she noticed a man and his German Shepherd guide dog. Impressed by the way they worked together, Janet eventually asked him about his dog. As it turned out, the dog was a Fidelco guide dog. "I have always been drawn to the breed because I had a German Shepherd Dog growing up. When I saw that man and his dog working together so beautifully, it was the motivation I needed to reach out to Fidelco." Upon doing so, Janet learned about Fidelco's



Puppy "Trooper"

In-Community Placement training model, which was ideal for her as a working mother who could not spend three or more weeks away from home to train. After the application process, Fidelco Placement Specialist Chris Eastwood brought "Trooper"—or "Super Trooper" as Janet affectionately calls him—into her life in 2019.

The scenarios Trooper encountered in Janet's home area and at the university included buses filled with students and backpacks, multiple lanes of traffic, bicycles, security checkpoints, metal detectors, and more. "I wasn't in Fidelco's life, Fidelco was in mine," says Janet. "Trooper is so smart and considerate. For instance, he doesn't want me to have to walk through puddles. He slows down and speeds up in response to what is around us—unlike a cane. With Trooper, I have a lot more security and a lot less anxiety."

Fortunately, the University of Pittsburgh could not have been more accommodating when it came to Janet and Trooper. As soon as she received him, the

university put together a meet and greet with Chris Eastwood in attendance to answer questions about guide dog etiquette and training. Everyone at work fell in love with him, but also gave Janet the time and space needed to get acclimated and develop a strong bond with Trooper. Janet laughs, "There are times when colleagues come to my desk, and I know they're more interested in seeing Trooper than talking to me."



Janet and "Trooper"

Janet continues to keep in touch with Trooper's Puppy Raisers, Jane and Michael Sirois, who have raised eight puppies for Fidelco!

"A lot of people had to do a lot to get Trooper to me and I am forever grateful. At least one person will stop me every day to say, 'What a beautiful dog!' And he really is in so many ways." 🐕

FIDELCO GUIDE DOGS PUPPY OLYMPICS 2024

Fidelco's Puppy Olympics, now in its fourth year, is a wonderful opportunity for our pups-in-training to interact with each other and work on the skills they will need to become incredible guide dog partners for people who are blind.



The event is kicked off by an **Opening Ceremony** with a Fidelco dog-in-training carrying a flameless torch. Pups earn points for each event and the medal winners take their places on the podium!



Bobbing for Apples

Volunteer Puppy Raisers have one minute to encourage their pups to touch, pick up, and bring them an apple. This game helps to build the relationship between the dog and human, and to re-enforce the "fetch" skill.

Musical Chairs

Volunteer Puppy Raisers walk around the circle with their pup and when the music stops, they must place the pup in a "sit" or "down" stay and grab a chair. If the pup breaks the "stay," the Puppy Raiser must leave their chair and correct the pup. The round is over when all seats are taken. This game re-enforces obedience around other dogs.

Bowling

The puppy has two attempts to knock down the pins, but the Volunteer Puppy Raiser cannot touch the pins or the dog. Pups sharpen their problem-solving skills and learn to rely on themselves to overcome obstacles.



Egg Race

The pup is guided to "heel," "stay," and "recall" while balancing an egg on a spoon. The fastest without dropping the egg wins, and pups learn obedience around other dogs.



Dr. Arnold Goldman with Vet Med staff

Fidelco's Veterinary Medical Department Welcomes Dr. Arnold Goldman

As part of an ongoing commitment to provide the highest quality veterinary care to our German Shepherd Dog colony, Fidelco hired Dr. Arnold Goldman in December of 2023 as our consulting veterinarian.

Dr. Goldman is the founder and owner of Canton Animal Hospital in Canton, CT. He has been in practice for 38 years and brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to Fidelco to assist us in creating healthy German Shepherd guide dogs.

He is actively involved in helping staff determine which pups will be physically most suitable for guide dog work.

When asked about his new association with Fidelco, Dr. Goldman says the work is "so very rewarding, and I am thoroughly enjoying it. Fidelco needs someone who is flexible, and I am trying to do that by assisting in whatever needs to be done. The mission is great and so are the dogs!" We look forward to a long and productive relationship with Dr. Goldman. 🐾

Lions Club Partnership Continues to Flourish

The special partnership between Fidelco and Lions Clubs throughout Connecticut and New England in service to individuals who are blind continued to flourish in 2023–2024. More than \$80,000 was donated and many collaborative events were held.

In addition, participation in quarterly New England Lions Advisory Board meetings has grown since we've been able to host meetings in Bloomfield again. Lions in other parts of New England frequently join us virtually via Zoom.

We look forward to continued growth in our partnership as we work collaboratively in our joint mission in service to people who are blind. 🐾



Fidelco's newest Lions-funded van

Support from the Connecticut Lions Eye Research Foundation and generous matching donations from the Durham, Darien, and Meriden, CT, and Maine District Lions—and other gifts from clubs throughout Connecticut—made it possible for us to add our latest Lions-funded van to our Fidelco fleet. The new Chrysler Pacifica showcases our partnership with recognition on the back of the vehicle—look for it throughout Connecticut and beyond.



The Lions of New England view our service impact as a critical pathway to a better world. Every act of generosity the Lions have performed for Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation has the potential to create lasting positive outcomes. Whether it's annual donations by clubs, fundraisers on Fidelco's behalf, the many dozens of puppies that Lions have sponsored and raised, or the many vans that Lions have donated over decades, we are profoundly committed to our partnership.

In 1925 Helen Keller challenged the Lions to become her 'Knights of the Blind in the Crusade against Darkness.' The powerful bond between Lions and Fidelco personifies that timeless challenge.

*-Hilary Kumnick, President
New England Lions
Advisory Board (NELAB)*



Chris Norwood and "Leeta"

| Volunteer Story: **Chris Norwood**

Chris Norwood was inspired to become involved with Fidelco while at a work event where Paralympic athlete and Retired U.S. Navy Lieutenant Brad Snyder was the guest speaker. "To see firsthand the bond Brad had with his Fidelco guide dog and the impact the dog had on his life was very powerful," shares Chris.

Chris quickly decided to volunteer with Fidelco and has since devoted countless hours serving in many capacities. As four-time Puppy Raisers, Chris and his family have welcomed Fidelco pups "Piper," "Cami," "Parrow," and "Uni" into their home. They also

adopted Fidelco career-change dog, "Leeta," who is a cherished family pet.

Chris is part of a network of volunteers and staff who provide guidance, advice, and friendship throughout the puppy raising process. "One thing I learned very quickly is the amazing people who repeatedly open their hearts and homes to these puppies are a very special group," Chris shares. "Spending Saturday mornings with them is not only educational but fun. Some of the more experienced Puppy Raisers share tips and personal success stories, and everyone joins in to welcome new puppies on placement day."

While Chris was raising Piper, he accepted a new career opportunity with The Hartford. "It was very important to find an employer that shared my views on volunteering and giving back to the community. I found that and more when I joined The Hartford," Chris says. "Employees are given paid time each year to volunteer with the organization of our choosing. Fidelco and The Hartford seemed like a great fit."

The Hartford's commitment to community and advancing social equity is reflected in its history of support of organizations like Fidelco. Through matching gifts, grants, and employee engagement, The Hartford has contributed to Fidelco's charitable mission of providing guide dog partnerships for people who are blind.

Chris has organized employee service days when The Hartford team members help with everything from kennel cleanups, to outdoor raking and planting, to van cleaning. Fidelco provides tailored program options to give corporate partners opportunities for team building and employee engagement, while enhancing guide dog training to make a difference in the lives of Fidelco clients.

"One of my favorite things to do is bring the puppies in to work with me," says Chris. "Colleagues love it, and it is so beneficial for the dogs to learn how to navigate in the office environment. It's a great chance to socialize the puppies while at the same time educating people on everything that goes into raising a future guide dog. Whether it's a Tuesday night meet-up, school visit, or meeting with a local

scout troop, 4-H, or Lions Club, you are always met with excitement and curiosity."



Chris and "Piper"

Thanks to Chris and other volunteers, staff and supporters, there are many full-circle moments. Chris remarks, "The best part is being able to meet these puppies during those first eight weeks and then follow along as they get placed with their Puppy Raisers, grow and develop in class each week, and head down the path to become a guide dog, a breed mom, or whatever lies ahead." 🐕

It's one of the greatest feelings in the world when you see a guide dog with their human partner out living their life.


You can usually tell a Fidelco guide dog from far away. You are thrilled to see them doing exactly what we raise them to do, sad to know that your time with them is always too short, but most of all proud to think you played a little part in changing someone's life."

Donor Spotlight: Suburban Subaru

Fidelco is honored to have been selected as Suburban Subaru's hometown charity for the 12th year in a row, receiving a gift of \$44,900.

Subaru's Share the Love event allows retailers across the country, like Suburban Subaru, to give back to their communities. Fidelco is one of more than 2,300 charities across the country to benefit from this initiative.

"Fidelco's special breed of German Shepherd guide dogs provides immediate independence, positively changing the lives of people who are blind," says Peter Krause, Suburban Subaru president.

From November 2024 – January 2025, please designate Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation to receive a \$250 donation from Subaru of America, Inc. (Visit www.suburbansubaru.com/share-the-love.html for exact dates when they become available) 



Suburban Subaru check presentation to Fidelco

The Shepherd Club: Exclusive Access to Fidelco's Kennel Cam!

When you become a monthly donor, you also become a member of Fidelco's Shepherd Club! Your sustaining support in any amount helps to ensure Fidelco's future and grants you access to special member perks, such as:

- Exclusive access to the "Kennel Cam." Watch puppies and dogs as they play, train, learn, and grow in Fidelco's Pup House, kennel, and enrichment areas.
- Biannual updates detailing how your donations are making a difference.
- Recognition in *FidelcoNews*, our widely distributed newsletter.
- Fun Shepherd Club stickers featuring Fidelco pups and dogs.

Whether it's \$10, \$100, or more, your monthly support makes possible the incredible guide dog partnerships like those you've read about in this newsletter.


To learn more about how you can become part of The Shepherd Club "pack," contact: Mark McGrath, Philanthropic Relationship Director, emmcgrath@fidelco.org / t: 959.282.2181

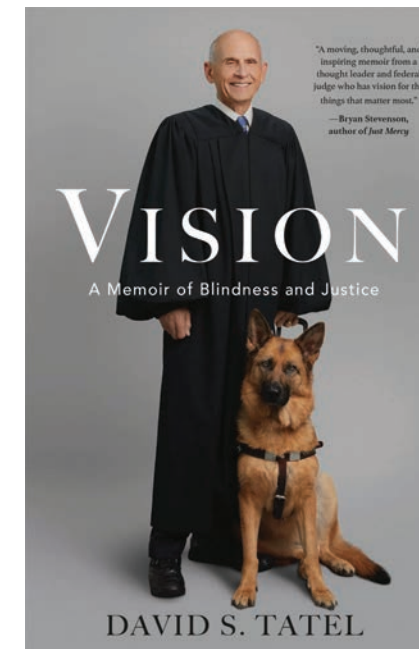


Scan to visit The Shepherd Club's Wall of Monthly Donors.

Vision: A Memoir of Blindness and Justice

The Honorable David S. Tatel, retired judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit Court and Fidelco client, has recently published his memoir, *Vision: A Memoir of Blindness and Justice*. Judge Tatel was previously the subject of an article in the fall 2020 edition of *FidelcoNews* and partnered with his beloved guide dog, "Vixen," in 2019.

This fascinating book explores David Tatel's extraordinary life as an advocate for justice and equality and how he gradually came to terms with his diminishing sight. The book is available in bookstores and on Amazon, and there is an audible version available through audible.com. 



The Vision Society



October is National Estate Planning Awareness Month. Fidelco's partnership with FreeWill makes it easy to write your legal will from the comfort of your home for free in 20 minutes. Creating a will is one of the most significant ways to care for the people and causes you love.

If you choose to name Fidelco in your will, create a charitable gift annuity, or a charitable remainder trust, you are ensuring our mission continues while providing financial benefit to you and your loved ones.

Visit freewill.com to get started today. Legacy gifts may reduce estate tax and can be a percentage of your estate or a particular dollar amount. Please be sure to speak with your estate planner or tax professional.



To learn more about how your legacy gift can make a lasting impact, scan the QR code.

For more information, contact: Richard Pummell, Vice President rpummell@fidelco.org