

Spring 2025

FidelcoNews

Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation

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Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation, Inc.



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Happy spring at last.

Along with flowers and hopefully milder temperatures, a new group of Fidelco dogs has come in for training. This is a fun bunch—all young dog antics along with the excellent discipline and adaptability their Puppy Raisers have helped them learn.

Walking through the training area is taking me a much longer time because under each desk is a dog I need (want) to stop and talk with. There's one whose ears cross over each other when he's tired, another who is part of a two-dog team being matched with a couple who are Fidelco clients, another who is heading for city life while her laid-back brother is going to a more rural area. There are fluffy German Shepherd Dogs with huge tails and some who are sleeker—they all shed the same!

They are a snapshot of the increased safety and independence they will bring to people who are blind. Fidelco German Shepherd guide dogs have changed lives for 65 years and thanks to your support, will continue. The one constant in all that time is the beauty and intelligence and absolute charm of these marvelous dogs.

Enjoy the spring!

My best,

Karen C. Tripp
Chief Executive Officer



Amy and "Olive"

Client Story: **Amy Ranzenberger**

"I'm a lot more confident when I approach the world with a guide dog," says artist and Fidelco client Amy Ranzenberger. "With my guide dog I feel safer and more secure."

As a teenager and young adult, Amy recalls, "I was pretty much in denial about my visual impairment and tried to function as a sighted person, mostly to avoid being made fun of. I eventually realized I wasn't helping myself trying to live that way." Amy then made the decision to apply for a guide dog, seeking greater safety and self-confidence.

Amy knew she wanted a German Shepherd guide dog, as she'd grown up around German Shepherd Dogs as pets. She applied to Fidelco and was excited when her application was approved and she was partnered with her first guide dog, "Wicka." Over the years, Amy has had three Fidelco guide dogs: "Wicka," "Orvyn," and "Olive," and was recently partnered with her fourth Fidelco guide dog.

"My son was two years old when I received Olive. Olive has always been very good around him. She is sweet and gentle." Amy's household includes her husband, their 8-year-old son, a pet German Shepherd Dog, and two cats. "Everybody gets along," Amy shares. "Olive is definitely a member of the family."

Amy lives in a suburban area, with a city bus route at the end of her street. Amy and Olive take the bus into the city for errands and outings. "I get out with Olive as much as I can. She is such a great guide." Amy's interests center on the care of animals. "I try

North Star Night shows three guide dogs in harness, including a German Shepherd Dog in the middle, looking up at a bright North Star on a winter's night. "I got the idea and inspiration of my *North Star Night* piece from my beloved guide dog, Olive. In a sense, she is my north star, helping to guide me to where I need to go. Without her, I would be lost."

As with many of Amy's art pieces, *North Star Night* was created on an 11 x 14" illustration board. She began by drawing an original sketch with darker outlines and then used colored pencils to add color, depth, and dimension.

Amy says having a guide dog has enhanced her life, and through the recognition and celebration of her art, has brought renewed joy and meaning. "This has restored my confidence not only in my artistic abilities, but in life in general."

Olive recently retired from guide dog work and is now a beloved pet with Amy and her family. In March, Fidelco placed a successor guide dog with Amy, and their early weeks of partnership are off to a great start. Amy says her experiences with Fidelco have made the transitions

and placements with each of her guide dogs as smooth and supportive as possible.

"From client services staff to the trainers, everyone is professional and understanding. The placements and training I've received with each of my Fidelco guide dogs have all been amazing." 🐕



Amy with her *North Star Night* original art

to rescue animals when I can. If my husband or I find a stray, we work hard to find its owner." Amy's love of animals also inspires her artwork: she entered and won an art contest by the Cleveland Sight Center (CSC). Her winning piece, *North Star Night*, was made into holiday greeting cards available from CSC. Proceeds from the cards support CSC programs and services for people of all ages who are blind or visually impaired.

Fidelco Staff: **Above and Beyond**

When we say we're there for our clients for the lifetime of the guide dog partnership—24 hours per day, seven days per week—we mean it.

Since the average Fidelco guide dog partnership lasts a decade or more, changing circumstances are inevitable. Whether it's a client's move to a new location, an illness or injury requiring temporary care of their guide dog, or ensuring a guide dog team is comfortable navigating a new route, our trainers are always ready to respond.

The Honorable David S. Tatel, retired judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit and Fidelco client and his guide dog, "Vixen," are equally adept at navigating urban Maryland and rural Virginia, where the team splits their time. Fidelco Placement Specialist Chris Eastwood is helping to ensure the team's continued success nearly six years into their partnership.


Vixen's ability to work in both environments is based not only on her adaptability, but also on the traits she first exhibited as a tiny pup. From the moment she was born, the match-making process began. Fidelco staff carefully observed how she reacted to the sights, sounds, and smells in her environment. This observation continued during the 16 months she spent in the home of her Volunteer Puppy Raisers and throughout the six months of formal guide dog training she received once she returned to Fidelco.



Fidelco staff with guide dogs-in-training

When she was ready to be placed with a client, Vixen was specifically chosen for Judge Tatel because of her temperament, gait, and ability to smoothly transition from urban to rural environments.

"Vixen is as skilled in the country as she is in town," says Judge Tatel. "In D.C., she reliably guides me through all the normal city hazards...in the country, she guides me down country roads while warning me of approaching vehicles and listening to birds and sniffing for deer and other critters."

Donor support of Fidelco's mission allows us to deliver highly individualized services to our more than 150 active guide dog teams day or night, year after year. Whatever it takes. 



Volunteer Story: **The Helming Family**

Volunteers are critical to Fidelco's success. We are grateful for the hundreds of volunteers who support nearly every aspect of our work. From administrative and event support to raising and socializing future guide dogs, Fidelco's mission is dependent, in large part, on the dedication of volunteers.

As Volunteer Puppy Raisers, the Helming family welcomed the first pup they raised, "Ivan," into their home at 8 weeks old. For more than a year, they attended weekly classes at Fidelco and exposed Ivan to a wide variety of experiences at home and out and about in their community. Puppy Raisers like the Helmings are the first influence in the lives of future Fidelco guide dogs like Ivan, and their patience, love and dedication pay off in a big way for our clients.

At around 14 months, Ivan came back to Fidelco's Training Center for formal training with a certified Trainer/Instructor. Six months later, he was ready to be placed with Fidelco client and board member, Karen Petrou, as her fifth Fidelco guide dog. Since August 2024, the Helmings have been raising "Xando," and we recently checked in with them to learn more about their puppy raising experience with Fidelco. While all the Helmings have been involved in the raising of Ivan and Xando, Todd (dad) and Alena (7th grade daughter) have taken the lead.

How did you first hear about Fidelco and what inspired you to become a Puppy Raiser?

Todd: I heard about Fidelco as a youth in the late 1980s. We had two German Shepherd Dogs in our household growing up, so I was familiar with the breed and how intelligent they are—they're amazing family dogs in addition to their working abilities!

Alena: I told my dad I was possibly interested in a career in animal training. He told me about Fidelco, and we talked about the possibility of working with the trainers at Fidelco to raise and train a pup. I was only in 5th grade at the time, but excited by this opportunity to learn from the Fidelco trainers how to work with a puppy!

Todd: Also, our youngest son sent a note to Santa saying all he wanted for Christmas was a dog. It seemed like everything was aligning, and we needed to find a dog! We reached out to Fidelco's puppy department in mid-December. We then visited a few classes and had a meeting with the trainers before being matched with our first puppy in February.

What are some of the rewards and challenges in raising a Fidelco puppy?

Todd: In our family, the rewards far outweigh the challenges. These puppies do need a lot of attention and help as they learn to navigate the world, but they give much more than they take!



"Ivan" and the kids

When our children are having a tough day at school or home, they love to spend time with the puppy, which relaxes them and helps them to decompress.

Alena: Each dog is a little bit different in how they communicate with us. Understanding what they are trying to communicate has been a challenge for me. When Xando isn't working, I love to play with him. That and seeing how far he has come in his training are very rewarding!

How do you balance puppy raising with daily life?

Todd: One of the reasons we decided to work with Fidelco versus having a pet was so this dog could be part of our daily life. We are very busy with sports, scouts, work, school, family, church, and a host of other activities. Fidelco pups are service dogs, so we take him with us to all of our daily activities. The dog comes to work with me and attends school, club, and sports events with the kids. As a high-energy breed, German Shepherd Dogs love a stimulating, busy routine!



"Xando" and "Ivan"

Alena: When we take Xando out, we practice training and commands. This gives him real-life experiences nearly every day. Xando also gets used to many busy environments. We take him everywhere we go.

What has been the most memorable moment in your puppy-raising journey so far?

Alena: The most memorable part of my puppy-raising journey has been learning skills from the Fidelco trainers and watching the pups grow up into adult dogs. Our first Fidelco dog was recently placed and is now helping someone safely navigate the world. We are very proud of him, and it is rewarding to know we have helped somebody.

Todd: Within our family, I have watched my daughter grow in skill and confidence. Our family has been positively impacted by raising puppies, and we have found this both rewarding and one of the most memorable parts of this journey!

What advice would you give to someone considering becoming a Puppy Raiser for Fidelco?

Alena: Here is what I would recommend: Visit a Saturday class to meet the dogs and the trainers. Talk to people who are raising pups to learn more about it. Once you are raising a pup, always carry towels with you! When your puppy grows up and goes in for training, get another puppy right away so you don't miss the first one!

Todd: Raising a Fidelco puppy is a lot like raising a child, but the stages go faster. Potty training is a couple of weeks instead of a couple of months. The teenage phase is a couple of weeks instead of a couple of years. When they do go off for training, it is a lot like a child leaving for college. You miss them, but you are proud and hope the best for them! 🐕



OCTOBERFEST

FALL FESTIVAL & OPEN HOUSE



FOOD TRUCKS



CAR SHOW



PUPPY OLYMPICS

Saturday, October 4 | 10AM

Rain date: Sunday, October 5

**GUIDE DOG DEMOS, BLINDFOLD WALKS,
RAFFLES, FOOD, KIDS CORNER, TOURS,
CAR SHOW, PUPPY OLYMPICS & MORE!**

FIDELCO.ORG/OCTOBERFEST





Client Story: **Todd Higgins and “Fergus”**

Connecticut native Todd Higgins has been part of the Fidelco family for over 40 years—he partnered with his first Fidelco guide dog, “Promise,” in 1984. Todd is now working with his fifth Fidelco guide dog, “Fergus,” and says it’s his love for German Shepherd Dogs and our In-Community Placement Model that have made him such a longtime Fidelco client.

After sustaining vision loss from a 1983 car accident, Todd received life-skills training at The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, MA, and vocational rehabilitation from CT’s Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB). While initially a white cane traveler, Todd’s BESB counselor suggested he consider contacting Fidelco about guide dog partnership. Todd says that decision, which resulted in partnering with Promise, was pivotal. He shares, “That was the springboard for me to feel more confident and get my life back.” With Promise, Todd enrolled in a local community college and then at the University of Connecticut where he graduated in 1990.

In addition to Todd's guide dog partnership, another partnership began at Fidelco: it was at a Fidelco bikeathon in the late 1980s while Todd rode a tandem bike that he met his wife, Maureen. She was a Fidelco Volunteer Puppy Raiser who raised two pups and spearheaded adding a bikeathon to Fidelco's annual walkathon. The couple married in 1993.

After living in Connecticut for several years, Todd and Maureen moved to northern California in 2004 where Todd began work as an advocate at Disability Rights California in Sacramento, the largest disability rights organization in the country. The organization's mission is to protect and advocate for the rights of California residents with disabilities. In the two years following the COVID-19 pandemic, Todd and Fergus traveled across the state coordinating Covid vaccine clinics for people with disabilities, especially for those who are homeless. Todd and Fergus continue to travel for work, with Todd managing a grant providing advocacy services for people with traumatic brain injuries, focusing on veterans and victims of domestic violence.

Todd says his placement with Fergus in 2019 took longer than the prior ones, but he benefited from the wait and was more mentally prepared to begin work with a new guide.


From the get-go, Fergus was calm and very settled, making Todd immediately confident in Fergus' abilities. When the Covid shutdown occurred and Fergus' work routine was vastly altered because Todd was working from home, Todd ensured Fergus continued to receive the exercise and stimulation he needed. Once the



Higgins family pet, "Nollaig,"
Todd and "Fergus"

shutdown was over, Todd says Fergus seamlessly got back to his work routine (two hours of travel each day, by bus and train) to get to Sacramento.

Todd enjoys attending concerts and plays, dining

out, and traveling across the country to visit family in Connecticut and elsewhere—always with Fergus by his side. He also loves to watch Fergus play in the back yard with their pet Newfoundland dog. Todd says that even at seven years old, Fergus still acts like a pup when the two dogs are playing. "I can't imagine life without a guide dog," says Todd. "I appreciate the safety, security, and confidence I have when Fergus is with me." 

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without a guide dog,
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is with me.**

A Full and Enriched Li



"In 1984, my first Fidelco guide dog, 'Promise,' gave me a life back that I thought was gone forever. Forty years later, I'm with my fifth Fidelco guide dog, 'Fergus,' and continuing to live a very full and enriched life."
-Todd H.



"Fergus" as a 3-week-old pup.



"Fergus" with his
Puppy Raisers.



Todd and "Fergus" on a
neighborhood walk.

fe: Todd and "Fergus"



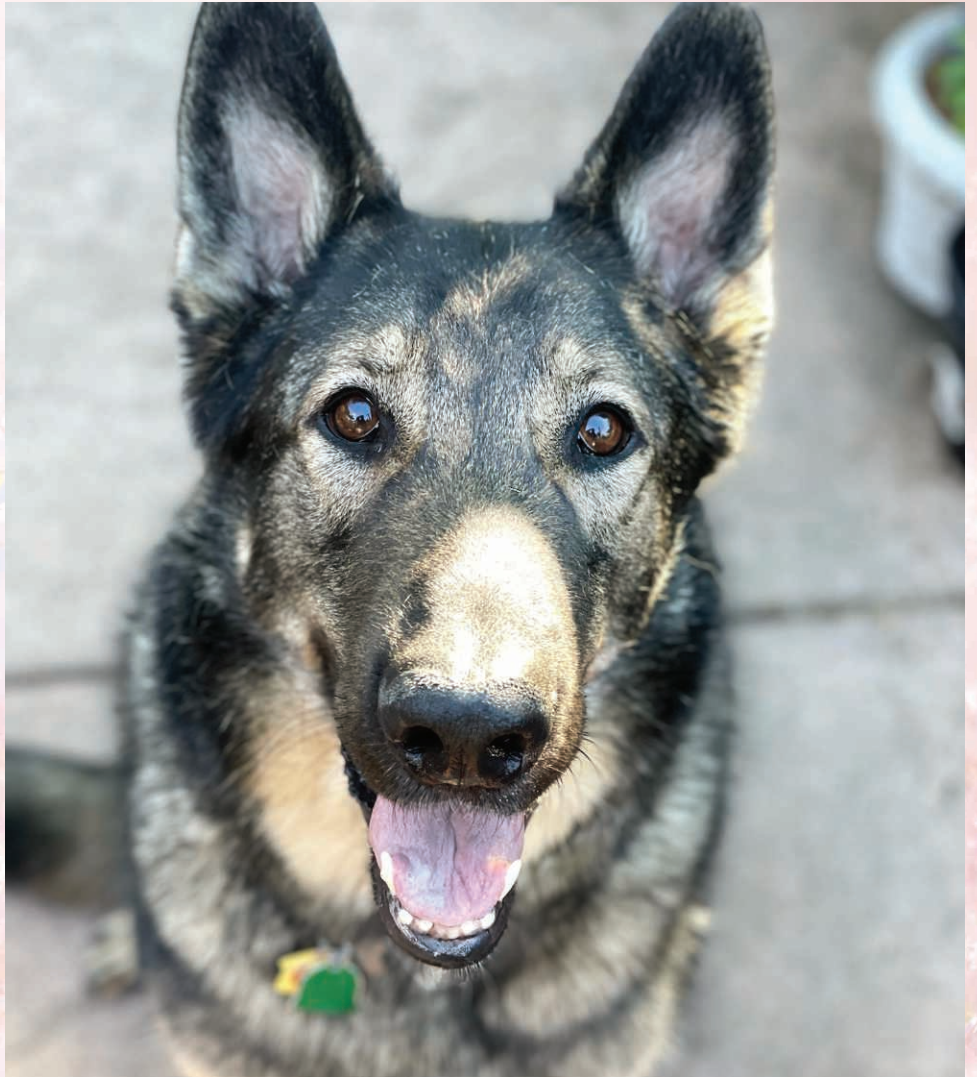
"Fergus" at 5 months old.



"Fergus" during placement with Todd.




Todd and "Fergus" traveling by bus.



His first days in the Pup House—and many months of socialization and training with his Puppy Raisers and Fidelco's expert trainers—all prepared Fergus for his placement as a trusted guide dog partner for Todd.

Fidelco on the Air: A Special Podcast on *Hello Connecticut* (WFSB) with Renee DiNino

The stories of our clients, volunteers and staff continue to captivate listeners with in-depth conversations on *Hello Connecticut* (WFSB) with host Renee DiNino.

Renee brings decades of involvement with Fidelco, amplifying the profound connections between Fidelco dogs and people. 



To hear the most recent podcast and listen to past episodes, scan the QR code.



The Vision Society



Spring is a season of renewal and an ideal time to plan for the future. Creating a will is one of the most meaningful ways you can care for the people and causes that matter most to you.

Through our partnership with FreeWill, it's easy to write your legal will from the comfort of your home in just 20 minutes—at no cost to you. By including Fidelco in your estate plans, you help to ensure our mission continues while also providing financial benefits to you and your loved ones.

Legacy gifts can reduce estate tax and may be designated as a percentage of your estate or a specific dollar amount. As always, we encourage you to consult with an 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

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

When you become a monthly donor, you gain membership to Fidelco's Shepherd Club—a dedicated group of supporters helping to shape Fidelco's future. No matter the amount, your monthly gift makes a difference and unlocks these exclusive perks:

- Live Kennel Cam Access – Watch adorable Fidelco puppies and dogs as they play, train, and grow in our Pup House, kennel and enrichment areas.
- Biannual Impact Updates – Learn how your support changes lives.
- Recognition in *FidelcoNews* – Receive recognition in our widely distributed newsletter.
- Exclusive Shepherd Club Stickers – Show off your Fidelco pride with fun dog-themed stickers.

Every monthly gift, big or small, strengthens our mission and helps to create incredible partnerships.

Want to join the pack? Contact Mark McGrath, Philanthropic Relationship Director at mmcgrath@fidelco.org or 959.282.2181.




Scan the QR code to visit The Shepherd Club's Wall of Monthly Donors!

Donor Spotlight: Harvey & Lewis Opticians

"At Harvey & Lewis Opticians, we understand the profound impact that vision has on independence and quality of life. Fidelco's mission to provide life-changing guide dogs to individuals who are visually impaired is something we deeply believe in. We are proud to support an organization that helps empower people by giving them greater mobility, confidence, and connection to the world around them."

Fidelco is deeply grateful for our partnership with Harvey & Lewis Opticians. Through generous financial gifts, sponsorship of Fidelco events, participation in the Volunteer Puppy Raiser Program, and contributions collected from

Dog House donation boxes at Harvey & Lewis locations—their years of charitable support help create transformative guide dog partnerships for people who are blind. 



Fidelco Guide Dog Foundation, Inc.

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**Their success
starts with you.**

Help create partnerships
that transform lives.

**Please donate
today at Fidelco.org**

