

SOUTHEASTERN GUIDE DOGS NEWS

Impact

FALL 2020

A D G, I'M NOT.

I was born for a purpose.

Private Battles

Facing the
Unthinkable

Taking Freedom Back

More Than A Dog

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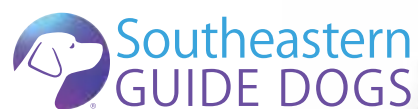
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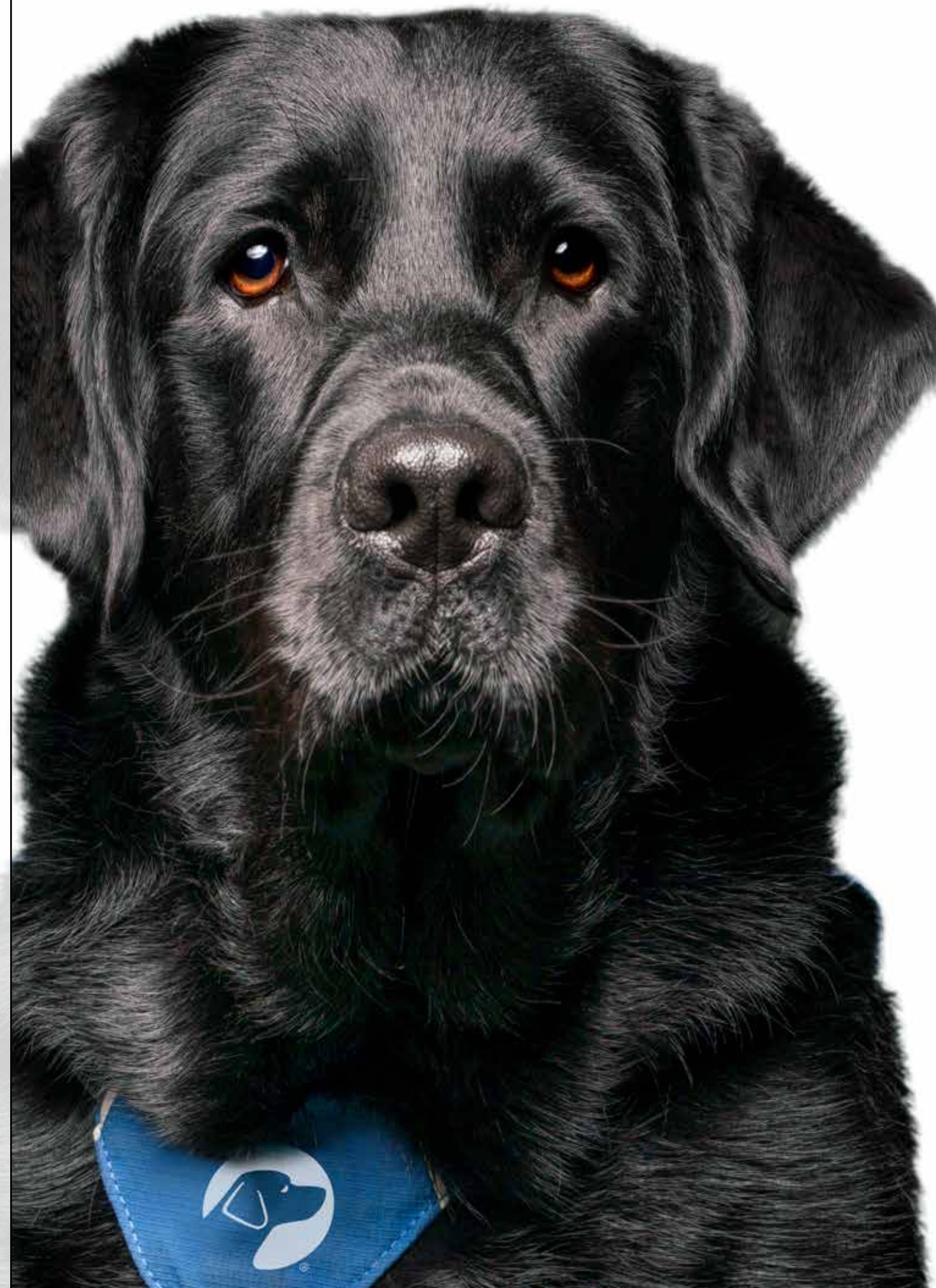


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from the CEO

Dear Friends,

You already know that our dogs are amazing and unique. Energetic, like Bristol. Silly at play and serious at work, like Buddy. Full of love, like Keith. And joyful, like Micky.

You'll meet these dogs here in these pages, but these are only four of nearly 600 extraordinary guide dogs and service dogs that are helping their human partners to lead independent, joyful lives throughout the United States. And coming behind them are hundreds of puppies and dogs-in-training that have yet to meet their destinies.

Our dogs are more than just dogs to the people who need them.

Our dogs have **vision** to guide a person with vision loss out of darkness and into the light of a new life. They have **strength** to give a veteran living with post-traumatic stress disorder the courage to step out of isolation. They have **love** to share with a child who has lost a parent in the line of military duty. And they have **intelligence** to adapt to an individual's particular needs and keep them safe and secure.

As you read these stories about our dogs and the people whose lives they're transforming in magical ways, please know that our mission is only made possible because of you.

Warm regards,

Titus Herman
Chief Executive Officer



WINGS OF SUCCESS

BLACK HAWK DOWN

Somalia, early 1990s. Ongoing civil war resulted in chaos and widespread famine, and United Nations peacekeeping forces arrived to provide aid. U.S. forces joined the effort in 1992 on a humanitarian mission to get food to starving people where resources were controlled by various warlords. In 1993, attacks by warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid killed dozens of U.N. allies and four U.S. military police officers.

In the summer of 1993, U.S. Army Rangers from Bravo Company of the Third Ranger Battalion were deployed to Mogadishu as part of a special operations package called

Task Force Ranger (TFR). Their mission—to capture Aidid. On October 3, 1993, TFR launched a raid to capture three of Aidid's top lieutenants. Things went terribly wrong when Somali insurgents shot down two UH60 Black Hawk helicopters. Outnumbered 10 to 1, the men of TFR distinguished themselves in an 18-hour firefight that would later be recounted in the highly successful book and movie, *Black Hawk Down*. Nineteen Americans died and 78 were wounded.

Sergeant Keni Thomas survived that bloody day and has lived with the memories ever since.

**Keni Thomas &
Service Dog Keith**

PUPPY REWIND



Keith, Destined to Love | When puppy Keith first arrived in the arms of puppy raisers Shay and Brian Smith, they immediately sensed something special; something they couldn't put into words. "Just his warmth and the way he snuggled up," recalls Shay Smith. "I knew he was going to help someone who needed unconditional love and understanding."

This adorable black Lab spent his youth on 12 acres of land and delighted in running through the fields and finding the biggest sticks he could carry. He learned to watch (or nap) patiently in studios and theaters, where Shay rehearsed or performed as a dancer, actor, and singer. Whether in the fields or on stage, Keith gained confidence in his surroundings.

After playtime, this puppy was ready to learn. "When you put on his coat, his demeanor changed," says Brian. "He was on duty now and he took it seriously." As Keith grew, so did his sensitivity to those around him. "If something was wrong, he picked up on our feelings," says Shay "He was right there with love and affection."

Keith is named by longtime supporter Keith G. Hirst of Sarasota, Florida, whose name and generosity have left an imprint throughout our campus.



I WILL NEVER LEAVE A FALLEN COMRADE

Keni Thomas can still recite the Ranger Creed, nearly 30 years after enlisting in the U.S. Army. His favorite line? "Surrender is not a Ranger word. *I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy . . .*" To this day, Keni devotes his life to helping other veterans find hope.

After graduating from the University of Florida in 1989, he joined up. "I ended up in the Rangers because that's what my dad did," he explains. "He never pushed it on me. It was more of a sense of duty—of responsibility to one's country, embedded in my mind as a young man. For guys in special operations, the reason we end up in those types of units is that we're driven over-achievers . . . a different breed of people."

That drive earned Keni a long list of accolades, including the Bronze Star for Valor, the Combat Infantry Badge, Master Parachutist wings with over 400 jumps, the Special Forces Combat Diver qualification, and many more.

After the Army, Keni pursued an award-winning country music career, including appearing with his band in the movie *Sweet Home Alabama* and touring with the USO to perform for military

personnel serving in the Middle East. As an author, Keni's book *Get it On* became a bestseller, and as a speaker, his message of teamwork and leadership inspired hundreds of thousands. Keni has been recognized by Congress and the White House, and was inducted into the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Hall of Fame for his dedicated work on behalf of veterans and military families.

As he shares his story with veterans and others across the U.S., Keni draws from experiences on the battlefield and inspires listeners to learn from the Ranger Creed: *I will never leave a fallen comrade behind.* "When you're in the battle, all you are really fighting for is each other," he shares, and he challenges his audiences to do the same. For his speaking engagements and concerts, he flies his own plane, a Cirrus single engine cross-country aircraft.

PRIVATE BATTLES

Throughout the years and across the miles, Keni fought private battles. Survivor's guilt. The "why me?" question. "When the good life tries to put its eyes on you, you think about the guys that are gone and deserve to live," he says. "You think, 'I don't deserve to be here,' and you don't allow yourself to be happy."

He missed the brotherhood of the Rangers. "I can handle the trauma on the battlefield; we've been trained for that," he explains. "But here's the issue. You leave the military, and you no longer have the person on your right, the person on your left. You no longer have your sense of purpose."

Keni turned to the stage to find his purpose, but the lifestyle came with a cost. "I'm very comfortable on a stage," he says. "I own that space. It's mine . . . I own that hill. But as soon as I get off the stage, I'm ▶



**KEITH IS A FREAKING ROCK STAR!
HE ALLOWS ME TO TALK ABOUT
VETERAN'S ISSUES AND BE A LITTLE
BIT VULNERABLE. I DON'T HAVE
TO WEAR THE TOUGH GUY COSTUME
BECAUSE HE'S THERE.**



one guy. I have to deal with people and with the stress of airports and moving at a fast pace.”

The stress mounted, and Keni felt more anxious in crowds. He faced increasing bouts of anger, depression, and insomnia. And then he heard from his friend and mentor, retired Vice Admiral Joe Maguire, the esteemed former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, former acting Director of National Intelligence, and a 30-year Navy SEAL.

“Keni, I’ve known you for years,” Admiral Maguire said, “and you need a service dog. There’s no reason for you to be out there traveling alone. Think about what you can do for other veterans, letting them know it’s okay to ask for help!”

At first, Keni dragged his feet. Until he got this phone call:

Admiral Maguire: Hey, Keni

Keni: Hey, sir, how are you?

Admiral Maguire: I was talking to the guys at Southeastern Guide Dogs, and you haven’t put in your paperwork yet.



“I was saluting on the phone,” Keni says. “It took someone I respected and cared about. He knew me better than I knew me. There’s nowhere in our personality as Special Ops guys—it’s not in our DNA to say—‘I need help.’”

Admiral Maguire: Keni, when I asked you to fill out the paperwork, I wasn’t asking you.

Keni: Yes, sir!

“I’m so proud of his training,” Keni says. “He’s a freaking rock star! I’m always proud to show up at an event with him. He allows me to

Whenever Keni performs on stage, Keith curls up in his favorite spot—Keni’s guitar case.

Keni: I don’t think I need a dog. Someone else needs it more than I do.

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“I was saluting on the phone,” Keni says. “It took someone I respected and cared about. He knew me better than I knew me. There’s nowhere in our personality as Special Ops guys—it’s not in our DNA to say—‘I need help.’”

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

In June 2018, Keni arrived at the Southeastern Guide Dogs campus with Service Dog Class 267, and an affectionate Lab named Keith bounded into his life.

talk about veteran’s issues and allows me to be a little bit vulnerable. I don’t have to wear the tough guy costume because he’s there. He’s the best traveling dog. You put that vest on, and he knows he’s on.”

With the pandemic slowing Keni’s travels, he and Keith spend a lot more time at home where Keith fits right in with Keni’s fiancé, Heidi, and their children, Scarlett, 4, and Jett, 1. “Scarlett started calling him ‘Key-Buddy’ and the name kind of stuck,” Keni says. “He’s fantastic with them. He patiently lays there while they climb all over him. But I’m his. He’s attached to me. His eyes never leave me, no matter where I am in the room. If I get up in the middle of the night to feed Jett, Keith comes with me.”

As Keni muses about being a father, his thoughts turn back to Keith. “He’s a god-sent life lesson,” Keni says. “I know that Keith has unconditional love for me, and I’m figuring out how to be that for my kids. There’s a song I actually wrote that says, ‘Lord, make me the man that my dog thinks I am.’ Keith is a constant reminder of the man I’m supposed to be. He’s the standard-bearer. He’s more than a dog—he’s a gift. He’s been nothing but good, and I can always find the good in him.”

In times of uncertainty, one thing is certain. Neither this man nor this dog will ever leave the other behind. ●

YES, YOU!

THANK YOU, FRIENDS

To our volunteers, donors, and friends—your kindness matters to our veterans, and your help means that more veterans like Keni can receive dogs like Keith. Thank you for caring about our veterans!

“KENI, YOU NEED A SERVICE DOG. THERE’S NO REASON FOR YOU TO BE OUT THERE TRAVELING ALONE. THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR OTHER VETERANS, LETTING THEM KNOW IT’S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP!”



Valerie Welch & Guide Dog Micky

INSEPARABLE



Valerie visiting Southeastern Guide Dogs at 7-years-old.

FACING THE UNTHINKABLE

When a 10-month-old baby is diagnosed with a brain tumor, a mother's drive kicks in to do whatever it takes, and Celeste Welch became little Valerie's chief advocate. While raising a family of four daughters, Celeste and her husband Craig took on the challenges of caring for a seriously ill child.

Doctor's visits. Brain surgery. Chemotherapy that stretched into 18 months after the tumor grew back. Hospice for a bit. At age 5, Valerie was accepted for treatment at St. Jude's, which meant occasional trips to Memphis as well as radiation treatments. And besides fighting to beat cancer, Valerie was growing up legally blind.

PUPPY ◀ REWIND



Micky's Happy Tail | As a baby pup, Micky came into the world with a warning: beware of wagging tail! This little boy was always happy, wagging and wiggling from head to tail, whipping and toppling anything in his path. He was a joyful student, and as soon as he put on his coat, Micky knew exactly what he needed to do. "He was ridiculously smart," says Amy Francis-Bacon, his puppy raiser. "He'd wake up and say, 'Game on! Let's do this!'"

Micky discovered so many new things on his social outings. The day he visited Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium, he stopped by the otter exhibit, and the curious sea creatures swirled and stared from behind the glass, trying desperately to get his attention. But Micky was unfazed, as if to say "Guys, I'm in my coat. You can't distract me." Later, coat off, Micky interacted with the otters. "He was so happy," Amy chuckled. Luckily there was glass to spare the otters from Micky's happy tail!

Micky is named by longtime supporters Deborah and Dennis Bowgren of Eagle River, Wisconsin, in memory of Deborah's parents, whose nicknames were Smokey and Micky.

"They did the surgery, and during that they mistakenly cut her optic nerve and damaged her optic chiasm," explains Celeste. "She had perfect vision at 10 months old. Now she has no light perception in her left eye and no peripheral vision in her right eye. Over time, her vision has stabilized. But until she was 7 years old, she didn't realize her field of vision was limited and other people could see more than she can."

"At the hospital, I would bump into poles," explains Valerie, now a teenager. "They put them in the middle of the walk areas. When I was out in public, outside the house, I was hitting a lot of stuff."

LEARNING AND GROWING

Throughout the challenges, Celeste and Craig were determined to give Valerie and her three older sisters a life filled with rich experiences to complement their choice to homeschool. The family settled in Sarasota, Florida, after living in Gainesville and spending four years in Ecuador as missionaries. They bought a home on two acres, where they established a working plant nursery, fruit farm, and honey bee apiary. Celeste, an expert in rare fruit and bananas, taught her daughters how to care for their rare tropical fruit trees and edible landscaping.

And Valerie, her tumor sometimes stable, sometimes not, pursues hobbies and activities like any other teen. "I enjoy gymnastics," she shares. "I'm a hula hoop master. I went to Camp Sunshine for kids with brain tumors, and the first time I picked up a hula hoop was age 7. I liked it right away—I can even hula hoop with my feet!"

NO DOGS ALLOWED

As Celeste continued to advocate for Valerie, Valerie learned to advocate for herself. And that's when she started asking her parents for a guide dog. But there was one problem: Celeste was extremely afraid of dogs. And besides, she explained to her daughter, she was allergic. Clearly, dogs were not welcome in the Welch home.

Valerie's quest for a guide dog probably started in 2012, when she was 7 years old and visited our campus on a puppy hugging field trip with the Division of Blind Services. Who can resist puppies? (Answer: Celeste!)



The quest continued when Valerie met young Millie, first in Bradenton and again at Camp Sunshine in Maine. Millie had the same kind of brain tumor, and Valerie heard about Millie's dog Miracles, a Kids Companion dog and a gift from Southeastern Guide Dogs.

But the last straw was the time Celeste and Valerie ran into a group of our trainers working with guide-dogs-to-be at the UTC Mall in Sarasota. "Valerie had her white cane," Celeste recalls. "Marisa, the trainer, took so much time to talk to me. I had looked into Southeastern Guide Dogs once, and they said the age was 18. But Marisa knew the age limit was changing and encouraged us to please reach out to Southeastern Guide Dogs again."

OFF TO CAMP

With pressure from Valerie, Celeste made the phone call, just when Southeastern Guide Dogs had launched a new Guide Dog Camp for visually impaired teens and ▶



Valerie enjoying Guide Dog Camp in June 2019



"GUIDE DOG CAMP WAS LITERALLY LIFE CHANGING," CELESTE SAYS. "I'M CONVINCED THESE AREN'T JUST DOGS." SHE JOKES, "THESE ARE SOME OTHER ANIMAL THAT YOU'RE PASSING OFF AS DOGS."

OUT AND ABOUT WITH MICKY!

their parents. This two-day, overnight experience was designed as a hands-on introduction, helping families gain an understanding of what having a guide dog can mean. Reluctantly, Celeste signed up.

"My mom wanted me to go so that she could prove to me that a guide dog would be too much work," Valerie says, and Celeste concurs. "I agreed to the camp because I thought we would go, and she would see that big dogs are scary to be around."

"The camp was literally life-changing," Celeste says. She jokes and explains, "I'm convinced these aren't just dogs. These are some other animals that you're passing off as dogs."

HAPPY MICKY

The instant they returned home from Guide Dog Camp, they filled out a guide dog application. Just a few months later, in August 2019, Valerie attended Guide Dog Class 281. Since she was only 15 and attended the adult class, Celeste came along, enjoying her own private dorm room next door to Valerie's.

And that's when Valerie was paired with the lovable, cuddly,



playful, life-changing Micky. The Micky whose tail never stops wagging, especially when he's with Valerie. Micky's infectious joy surrounds Valerie, whether she's having a good day or not.

Now 16, the inseparable Valerie and Micky share secrets and adventures. They share an Instagram account filled with memories and excursions. There's Micky, face-to-face with an aquarium full of fish or a chimpanzee behind the glass at Busch Gardens. There's Micky going through security at the airport. Together they've shared doctor's appointments, shopped at malls and grocery stores, enjoyed parks and trails, dined in restaurants, played in pools, and continue to do what best friends do best: stick together.

And Celeste? She's still very much involved as she coaches Valerie how to advocate for herself. After all, her youngest child will be on her own one day, and that day isn't so far away. Knowing Micky is there makes all the difference for this mama-bear.

"My mom doesn't worry as much," Valerie says simply. "I always have someone with me." ●

YES, YOU!

THE INSEPARABLE YOU

When you stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Southeastern Guide Dogs, whether volunteering as a puppy raiser or a dog sitter for weekend getaways, donating your time on campus, fundraising for our Walkathons, or giving financially, your generosity becomes inseparable from the impact our dogs make. It's all because of you that Valerie and Micky are together. And it's all because of you that our nearly 600 alumni teams continue to feel loved and supported by the Southeastern Guide Dogs family. Thank you!



A DOG, I'M NOT.

I was born one-of-a-kind.

Trained by the best to be the best.

When you first looked into my face,
You said that I saved you.


I have been by your side ever since.

I am the calm when

Everything is screaming.

A dog, I'm not.

You call me your hero.

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Kenneth E. Hughes and
Guide Dog Buddy



Finally Feeling Free

Kenneth E. Hughes is FUNNY...

So funny that he produces and performs stand-up comedy through his business, 20/20 Productions, an apt name for a blind comic. “I live for comedy; I inherited it from my father,” Kenneth says. “I always liked to have fun, to make people laugh.”

His own laughter erupts easily, a happy chortle punctuated with wit and storytelling. But dig a little deeper, and behind the humor he’ll tell you how—like most comedians—the jokes came in handy as a cover-up for youthful insecurities.

AWKWARD MOMENTS

Imagine being a teenager and thinking you can see as well as the other kids because that’s all you know. That was Kenneth. He passed the optometrist’s vision test and got his license at 16, but there were all those awkward moments.

“Looking back, I’m trying to be like the other guys,” he explains. “I’m not good at football or basketball. I can’t catch. I feel inadequate at my first job at Taco Bell because I’m making mistakes. At 18,

I work as a production operator in manufacturing, and contaminated bottles always get past me. I try—I focus—but I’m very embarrassed because people think I’m careless or lazy. In college, I feel like a bad student because I write notes down, and it looks like gibberish. I read and lose my place constantly.”

And then there were the car accidents, which started out minor but escalated. Fender benders. A few totaled cars. Two pedestrians hit—though nothing serious.

PUPPY REWIND



Silly Buddy! | If his graduating class had a yearbook, Buddy would have won the award for class clown! As a puppy, Buddy intuitively knew how to make people laugh. The words “goofy,” “comical,” and “easy-going” described this fun-loving boy to a tee. Buddy thrived on being silly just to get a chuckle. “Whenever he swiped something forbidden like a sock, he’d come running to show us,” laughs puppy raiser Tina Della. “He always had the goofiest look on his face!”

This silly little pup showed early on that he had a big heart. He could sense when someone needed extra attention and knew just what to do. “He picked up on feelings,” reminisces Tina. “It’s hard to explain, but everybody just felt good around him.” Buddy learned quickly. He took his training seriously and grew up to become an elite guide dog. But his silly side is still there, always ready to share with his new best friend—and comedian—Kenneth.

Buddy is named in loving memory of Bertram “Buddy” Lank through the generosity of Althea Lank and family of Weston, Massachusetts.

His parents and others couldn’t understand, and neither could Kenneth. “They thought I was careless and reckless, and I believed them, even though I thought something was wrong,” he says. One dark night he drove through a descending railroad crossing gate that smashed down on his windshield. “The scariest thing was I don’t know how close I was to the train,” he admits.

GOOD TIMES AND . . .

As a young adult, the funny, outgoing, popular Kenneth found his groove. After a stint in college (too hard to keep up, he says, even though he’s smart), he found his dream job as a flight attendant. It felt exhilarating to travel the world with friends, go out dancing in big cities, and earn a steady salary. But the nagging inadequacy and growing anxiety showed up again every time he tripped, missed a chair and fell, struggled in a dark club, or that one time he spilled hot coffee on a passenger during a long flight to Paris. “This is bad,” he thought. “I don’t want to hurt people!”

Then finally, a diagnosis shed light on years of blunders. The culprit? Kenneth’s undiagnosed retinitis pigmentosa, with its diminishing peripheral vision, bouts of low vision, and difficulty transitioning between light and dark spaces. In the years before figuring this out, his ego took recurring hits until finally, Kenneth understood the cause behind the struggles. “It was a big relief finally knowing,” Kenneth says. “It validates you. It legitimizes what you’re going through. I’m *not* just an idiot making clumsy mistakes. There’s a reason: *I can’t see.*”

Knowing brought change. Forced to quit driving, Kenneth eventually quit his job. “Now I’m young, unemployed, with a disability,” he says, chuckling at the memory. “It was kind of embarrassing. So, what do you do? I started making jokes. I turned to humor.”

KENNETH FINDS HIS BUDDY

Kenneth also turned to Southeastern Guide Dogs, where he found something—actually someone—who instantly boosted his confidence: his guide dog, Buddy. “Buddy and I are kindred spirits,” he says. “He’s silly and comical and energetic—and he loves to socialize, just like me.”

At first, Kenneth wasn’t sure he’d qualify for a guide dog, simply because he didn’t know how it worked. He still has some usable vision, he rationalized. He had several pet dogs, yet figured he knew nothing about

dog training. He’d notice other people with guide dogs and think, “That’s amazing—but I couldn’t do that.” But as an independent person with a burning desire for more freedom, he pushed forward, applied, and met his best friend, Buddy.

“I was so impressed with how ‘easy’ the trainers made it,” he recalls. “They were so good at working with us. They made it fun!”

FEELING FREEDOM

Kenneth remembers an ‘aha’ moment when he first connected with Buddy. “To walk down the street and have this dog protecting me—and me trusting in the dog and believing in the dog—it was amazing! It suddenly became obtainable instead of seeming like magic, and it got real—it was within my grasp. I’m walking down the street without worrying about getting hurt, missing the curb, tripping. I’m feeling confident and secure. I’m walking without seeing what’s in front of me, without fear. All because of Buddy.”

“The hardest thing about my vision has been feeling like I’m losing my freedom, not being able to go and come as I please. But now with Buddy, I’m taking my freedom back. I’m taking my power back. I don’t mean to be redundant, but I feel freedom. I feel liberated with Buddy!”

GRATEFUL AND GIVING

With Buddy by his side, Kenneth hopes to return the favor of this beautiful gift. “I want to start a walkathon; I want to puppy raise, I want to do it all,” he says. “I feel grateful for what I’ve been given, to everyone involved. It took so many people for me to get this dog—the raisers, the trainers, the donors, the organization. Are you sitting in the house because you can’t go out—because it’s not safe for you? What I’m experiencing with Buddy—I want someone else to experience that. I want to do my part because I can bring someone else happiness.” ●

YES, YOU!

YOU MAKE PEOPLE SMILE

When you share your gifts and talents with Southeastern Guide Dogs, you give the gifts of joy and laughter. You help raise and train playful, happy dogs like Buddy, and give people like Kenneth even more reasons to smile. Including us, your (smiling) Southeastern Guide Dogs community.



With Buddy,
I’m taking my
freedom back.
I’m taking my
power back.
I feel liberated
with Buddy!



**Katie McCoy &
Guide Dog Bristol**

LOVE Letters

Dear Katie,

Getting a letter from your guide dog might feel unusual. But I know deep down that I'm not just a dog. With you, I get to be so much more. And I can't imagine being with anyone but you.

The first day I met you, I was so excited and happy. I could feel it from my head to my tail. As we sat on the floor with my side pressed up against yours, I felt like I'd come home. I knew from that moment that as long as you were by my side, we could do anything. And I was right.

Since that day we've gone on so many adventures. Hikes in Virginia, trips to Disney, the streets of Charleston, and plenty of airplane trips to see family and friends. I love it when you say, "Let's go!"

Do you know what else I really love? The simple moments we share. Our evening walks, especially when we walk fast! Cuddling in our recliner. Listening to music. Sunday afternoon naps. Because when I'm with you, no matter where we go, my world is good. And you give the best belly rubs, back scratches, and hugs.

But mostly, I love how we're stronger together than we could ever be apart. You're my best friend, my family, my idol. People may believe that I do so much for you, but they've got it all wrong. You do so much for me! You give me a life of adventure beyond my wildest dreams. Because of you, I get to see the world, and I'm glad I can see it with you—and for you.

I'd do anything for you. I'd guide you to the moon and back, and if I had to choose between your safety and mine, I'd save you. I love you, Katie, and I couldn't have asked for a better forever friend.

With love,

Your guide dog, Bristol





Dear Bristol,

I know you must think me silly, writing a letter to my guide dog. But I need to tell you how you make my life so much better every single day.

Bristol, before you were around. I was afraid of traveling—of going anywhere, especially after dark—and I was embarrassed to ask for help. It might seem silly, but people are much more likely to help someone with a guide dog than to help someone who looks like they can see just fine.

I remember trying to cross the street without you—I was constantly looking around, trying to make sure no cars would turn on top of me. It took me forever to cross before, but now you speed me right across and take all the fear away.

Have you ever tried to go on a date and then find out it's really terrible, but you can't leave because you can't find the door on your own? Now I don't have to worry about that because you can be my escape plan! Together, we make a great pair.

The things you changed most for me are on the inside. People often ask, "Why do you need a guide dog?" "Because I'm legally blind," I tell them, but the real answer is because without you, Bristol, I would never go out with friends. I would never go on dates. And I would have a well of loneliness inside that could never be filled because I don't want to be a burden to others. But you never make me feel like a burden. You're always there, ready to go, ready to help.

I love you Bristol, to the moon and back, no matter where I go or how many years pass. You're not a dog—you're my best friend in the world.

Yours always,

Katie

YES, YOU!

DEAR YOU

If you only knew how much your friendship matters. It's hard to describe in just a few words, but the financial support that you give and the volunteer hours you share . . . well, they literally change everything for people like Katie and dogs like Bristol. Everything. Not kidding. Not exaggerating. Just telling the truth. Your help matters, probably more than any of us could ever really know. So, thank you.

Love, Southeastern Guide Dogs

PUPPY REWIND



Bristol on the Go! | When she was a puppy, you could look up the word "Go" in the dictionary and see Bristol's photo. "Bristol was full of energy," laugh puppy raisers Scott and Christine Snyder. "She had two gears: 'go' and 'sleep,' and she didn't really want to sleep that much!" In Bristol's young mind, why sleep when there was a big, bright, beautiful world waiting to be discovered?

It's no surprise that this girl-on-the-go was naturally athletic and loved meeting new people. Whether it was walks around the neighborhood, puppy playdates, or a trip to the grocery store, Bristol was always wagging and ready. "We were anonymous before, but with Bristol, we became local celebrities," Christine says with a chuckle. Bristol went on trips with Scott and Christine and even flew on a plane.

Now Bristol is guide gal to another girl-on-the-go, Katie McCoy. It's plain to see these forever friends are made for each other.

Bristol is named after a favorite sailboat by longtime supporter Judy White of Sarasota, Florida.



from our chairman of the board

Dear Friends,

As we head into the holidays, we have much to be grateful for at Southeastern Guide Dogs. We are thankful for your ongoing support. Because of you, we can continue to give the gifts of freedom, confidence, and hope.

When I think of the holidays, I think of family . . . those who bring our mission to life: our graduates, donors, sponsors, puppy raisers, volunteers, and staff. You make this organization unique and impactful.

As the new year approaches, we look forward to sharing new experiences with you, sharing new stories about our extraordinary dogs and the inspiring people we are privileged to serve. When you read this newsletter, please know that YOU are the reason our mission succeeds.

Thank you for all that you do for Southeastern Guide Dogs, and here's wishing you the healthiest and happiest 2021!

Warmly,

Raymond W. Bishop

Raymond W. Bishop
Chairman of the Board

P.S. You are important to us—so please practice safety in all that you do.



For the Love of Dogs

As Gary and Melody Johnson ease into semi-retirement, one thing hasn't slowed down: their acts of kindness. For nearly 15 years, they've been staunch supporters of Southeastern Guide Dogs, and Gary has served on our board of directors since 2015.

At the heart of their generosity are hearts of gold, but there's also a four-legged attraction: dogs.

"We're dog lovers," Gary says. Zoe, a chow-shepherd mix, was part of the family for 13 years, ever since she arrived one winter break with their then-college-aged son. Their son went back to school, and Zoe found her new forever home with the Johnsons.



When Zoe walked across the Rainbow Bridge, Gary and Melody's nest felt too empty. That's when Lola joined the family, hand-delivered by volunteers from a chow rescue in Houston. Lola is the princess of the house, and Gary and Melody let her decide where to walk and how far.

Dogs Deliver Hope

"Dogs add life to the home," Gary says, and he reflects on the special canines at Southeastern Guide Dogs. "These dogs bring hope—that's the most important thing. Whether it's a companion for our veterans or a brand-new world for someone who's blind, it's really exciting to see these incredible dogs make a huge difference in people's lives."

Gary and Melody enjoy investing in special projects for Southeastern Guide Dogs, and over the years, they've left quite a legacy. Among many other things, they're founding members of our Cornerstone Society; their names appear on a wing of Canine University; and they brought to



life our animated film, *Pip*, spreading awareness of our mission with over 200,000,000 YouTube views and counting.

Join Our Million-Dollar Match

Right now, the Johnsons are inviting you—our community of friends—to join them in supporting our priceless dogs. This caring couple has pledged to match your donation, dollar-for-dollar, up to \$500,000! What a magical, million-dollar-moment! And what a powerful reflection of their love for our dogs and the people who need them.

PRICELESS DOGS AND A MILLION DOLLAR MATCH!

Our life-transforming guide dogs, service dogs, and dogs provided to children and teens are absolutely priceless. We're dreaming big on behalf of these dogs and for the people who find hope at the other end of the leash.

Gary and Melody Johnson have pledged to contribute **\$1 for every \$1 you donate through December 31, 2020 up to \$500,000.**

Give Today!
Double
Your
Donation

Give online at
guidedogs.org/give



THANKS A MILLION!



HERITAGE
SOCIETY



Pursuing the Mission Ensuring the Vision

If our sidewalks could talk . . .

. . . those winding paths where people with vision loss hold the first harness of hope, behind the eager eyes of a superbly trained guide dog.

. . . those stepping stones to freedom where veterans with disabilities make life-changing connections with a calming service dog.

What would we hear?

Silent fears giving way to quiet confidence?
Darkness stepping toward a new kind of light?
Sparks of life where no flame had dared flicker?
The birth of freedom and independence?

Yes.

We can hear it.
And you can help make it last
through our Heritage Society.

As we pursue our mission, your legacy ensures that the vision endures. Thank you!

Our dogs have provided independence, confidence, and hope to more than 3,200 people with vision loss, veterans with disabilities, and children with significant challenges since our inception in 1982. And because of the Heritage Society, tomorrow's applicants will have the same opportunity.

The Heritage Society is a group of like-minded, caring individuals committed to ensuring the long-term stability of our school through wills and bequests. To join, simply notify us that you have included Southeastern Guide Dogs in your will by emailing heritagesociety@guidedogs.org.

A G, I'M NOT.

I was born for a purpose.

Trained to help you.

You hold me when you're afraid,

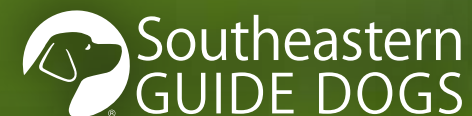
Whisper that I saved you,

That I'm your brightest star.

I am your guide, your support,

Your friend. A dog, I'm not.

With me, you see the world again.



1.800.944.3647 | GuideDogs.org

We provide all dogs and services free of charge.



We're proud to support Southeastern Guide Dogs

At Fromm Family Foods, we pride ourselves on offering a wide variety of premium dog and cat foods produced using the finest ingredients. Countless families across the country trust us with feeding their four-legged family members. We are honored to be selected as the Official Dog Food of Southeastern Guide Dogs, providing nutritional excellence to their extraordinary dogs throughout the United States.



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