

The Path to a Guide Dog

By Larry Marcum

As many of my friends know, I am about to embark on a new and exciting experience in my life. Because of my diminishing eyesight due to an eye disease called Retinitis Pigmentosa, I decided a few months ago to apply for a guide dog, also known as a seeing eye dog. Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) is also known as tunnel vision. The cells in the retina die off as it progresses, and the tunnel gets smaller and smaller, and can result in total blindness. Night blindness and loss of visual acuity are also symptoms. My field of vision is less than 10 degrees, whereas a person with normal vision has a field of about 180 degrees.

The school I selected is Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael. The course is 28 days long, with training 6 days a week. Persons eligible for a guide dog must be legally blind (corrected vision of worse than 20/200 or a field of vision of less than 20 degrees), at least 16 years old, physically, mentally and emotionally able to care for and work a guide dog.

The application process has included doctor's verifications, Orientation & Mobility training (white cane), personal references and phone and personal interviews by the school. I was notified by the school just before Thanksgiving that I was accepted (and am I thankful!). I will travel to the school January 6th with graduation February 2nd.

This is an exciting time for me. Just knowing that right now as I write this, this dog that I have not met yet is being trained to help me. This dog will guide me for the next 8 or so years, going most everywhere with me, keeping me safe and allowing me to go places that otherwise would be difficult for me.

The dog was born at the school, bred from the school's own quality stock. Six weeks later the puppy went and spent about 18 months in the loving and caring home of a Puppy Raiser. This person, often quite young, has already had to part with this puppy that he or she took everywhere as a "Guide Dog in Training". I think about the heartache that this person felt when returning the puppy to school a few months ago. But I also know the pride that this person will feel at the graduation ceremony on February 2nd, seeing "their" puppy, now matured into a highly-trained, dedicated and devoted guide for me.

For the six months before I arrive at the school, the dog is trained daily in all the skills needed to be a guide. For the first three days when I am at the school the dog's instructor will be working with me, all the while evaluating me to make a perfect match of guide and handler. On the third day it is "Dog Day", when you are paired with the dog that has been matched to your particular needs and personality. Talk about the ultimate blind date! For the rest of the month we will be learning to work as a team along rural roads, city streets, in stores and crowds, and on public transportation. I will learn to put my trust in the dog, and the dog will learn of my love and appreciation of him.

This is just the beginning of a trip down the path of a guide team. I look forward to being able to introduce my dog to you.

Part 2

I was actually surprised at the response and interest by so many of you to my article last month. As I write this I am just a few days away from leaving for the school, so I thought I'd share some useful information in preparation to my return February 3rd. I will attempt to e-mail an article from school for the next *Post*, letting you all know how it is going there.

Guide Dogs are trained to be mobility partners for people who are blind or visually impaired. A Guide Dog team consists of a blind or visually impaired "handler" and a "guide". The handler has gone through an extensive training program to learn how to work and care for the Guide Dog. The guide is a specially trained dog, bred from stock that has been carefully selected for its even temperament, intelligence and good health. The dogs are taught good social behavior from the time they are puppies. They respond to obedience commands in addition to guidework, and they are trained to lie quietly when not guiding.

In order for the dog to maintain focus on its guidework and to ensure the safety of the team as they travel, the dog and handler must form a very close bond and learn to communicate with each other. The handler will need to act in ways that will reinforce this bond and maintain the training the dog has received. Therefore, it is important for you as friends and neighbors to respect the handler's needs and not do anything that would lessen the bonding process between the dog and its handler.

Although it is very tempting to approach and pet a Guide Dog, it is important that you greet the handler first and ask permission to meet his or her dog. Never distract a guide while it is working, because you may endanger the safety of the team or erode the dog's training. The dog should be on leash, under control, and not feel cornered when meeting people for the first time. Individuals should approach one at a time, speak softly to the dog and offer the back of their hand for the dog to sniff.

We'll see you in a month, thank you to all for your interest and good wishes!

Part 3

When you read this I will have been home for a couple of days, but as I write this here at Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael I am nearing the completion of an absolutely incredible month.

At this time last month I was still home in Forest Ranch, wondering what this experience would really be like. What would the school be like, and most importantly what would it be like to actually have a Guide Dog. I am happy to report that all of it is as much and more than I had imagined!

I now have a terrific new friend named Galleon. He is a 70-pound Golden Retriever / Yellow Labrador mix who will turn two years old January 29th. We are getting along great, with the bonding process progressing each day like any friendship, a matter of trust and respect growing on both of our parts.

The day that I received Galleon, the third day of class, was filled with much anticipation and anxiety. The instructors had carefully matched a dog that they had been training during the previous months. I am still amazed at how well the instructors do in matching dogs with students. There is not a dog in our class that I would rather have received.

When I was introduced to Galleon it was a moment of indescribable wonder. As each day has gone by Galleon and I have learned to dance together so to speak. Learning to walk, turn, stop and react together to so many things that the sighted world never needs to give a second thought to. Curbs, corners, poles, signs, pedestrians and other things that were recently obstacles and a source of great anxiety for me are now things that Galleon gracefully guides me around or warns me about.

Galleon is living up to the meaning of his name, The Spanish Galleons were first built in the early 1500's, had 3 or 4 sails and 3 or 4 decks. These ships navigated the treacherous waters, safely getting to the needed port. These ships were built to withstand severe weather, and rough seas. My Galleon has been equipped with the needed training to do the same for me.

The feeling that I experienced the first time I felt his body movements in the harness handle brought tears to my eyes. To be able to feel each of his 4 paws through the handle as they touched the ground is a feeling that will never leave me. But I've noticed as each day goes by our movements are starting to meld into a rhythm, a fluid movement that allows Galleon and I to sense each others actions. To be able to walk the same speed as sighted people again without the fear of tripping or running into something is independence beyond description.

We have taken some night walks here in San Rafael. I am night blind, which means that I practically have no vision at all. Can you try to imagine what it was like for me the first time in my 50 years to safely walk at night at normal speed without the deep concern of running into things? To safely cross an intersection with a trained dog who's total focus is to safely guide me is a true blessing. Before the graduation ceremony next Saturday I will get the privilege of meeting the person who raised Galleon as a puppy. Teaching him the habits that are so crucial in laying the foundation to become what he is today, a well focused guide, able to follow directions and ignore distractions that would take any other dog, or person as far as that goes, off course.

Like the ships over the centuries, he will safely bring me into many a port in the future. Thank you my Galleon.

Part 4

Wow, what an experience it is now having a Guide Dog to guide me. Galleon and I are getting along fine, he is doing a terrific job and I am still learning how to handle him. It is still amazing how quick he learns, responds and surprises me.

There are many misconceptions that the public has about Guide Dogs, and I thought I'd write about some of them.

You have a Guide Dog and you are not totally blind - Many people with Guide Dogs do have some vision, at least when getting their first dog. It takes a lot of close work when learning to handle a Guide Dog for the first time. The Guide Dog handler needs to know how to get from point A to point B, the dog does not until he learns the route through repetition. I've had people come up and ask me "Is he in training?" My response is "No, we're the real thing!" Because most cannot tell by looking at me that I am visually impaired, they wonder why I have a Guide Dog, or why I'm bringing a dog into a public building. Little do they know that as my vision is diminishing I would be mowing them down without my Guide. Many people like myself who once had fairly good vision may not "look blind" even after our vision is totally gone. The other day we were in Wal-Mart and I overheard a woman say to her husband "Hey Henry, look at the pets they let into these places nowadays". Maybe I should have gone back and explained to her why Galleon is not a "pet".

Can Guide Dogs read Stop signs? - No, they cannot read Stop signs or traffic signals. The way that Galleon works is that he guides me along a sidewalk or road until we get to the corner or a curb, or a complete obstruction. At that point he stops, which tells me that we are at an intersection or curb, then I probe out with my foot to feel the change while he waits for me to give him a direction command to proceed. It is up to me to listen to traffic patterns or other ways that I have been trained to use to know where and when to go next. If it is unsafe after I give him a command, he will stay put or pull me back, while probably thinking "Yo, human, don't you hear that truck coming?" The dogs have been trained to follow lines when possible, like curbs or road edges, so he also knows to stop when he gets to a corner in some downtown areas that have level corners without a curb, or wheelchair ramps at intersections.

Guide Dogs Are Overworked - Although Guide Dogs are called "working dogs", they do not "pull" us like sled dogs do. They guide us, and the harness is what we hold on to enabling us to follow them. Guide Dogs are treated with a lot of love, caring, praise and respect. They are housedogs when at home, are groomed daily, and have plenty of play and rest time. When I put Galleon's harness on him, believe me, he is anxious and excited to start working!

I would like to thank my many friends in Forest Ranch for the interest in our new partnership. I would especially like to thank Anita Chang for your expert skills at trimming Galleon's nails; Irv & Diane Mann for your very special caring; and most of all my wonderful wife Bonnie and loving parents Buster & Rhoda for your never-ending love and support.

Part 5

“Through Galleon’s Eyes”

Zzzzzzz, ugh, there’s that darned cat in the other room crying like a brat again this morning, I wish she’d just come in here and do that, I’d fix her, then I could go back to sleep, it’s hardly even light outside yet. Zzzzzz, huh? Oh, it’s just my Handler stepping over me from that human sleep place up there above me. Maybe he can shut that cat up soon like he does every morning.

Zzzzzzz, ok, ok, I’ll get up, but how about just a little more of that rubbing and scratching sir, then I can stand up and stretch too? I don’t know why he always has to hook that leash thing to my necklace just to walk into the room where we all hang out, like I’m really going to run this early in the morning? Oh boy, whoopee, there she is, that nice Mrs. Handler, maybe if I wag my tail and wiggle my body she’ll notice me. She did – she did!

The great outdoors, oh the new smells. Sniff, sniff, hmm, I wonder who dropped by last night, I can smell that they were here but I just can’t quite seem to place them. Ok sir, I’m all through now, hurry up and put that leather handle thing around me so I can take you places, but let’s start easy this morning, I’m still trying to wake up. Sure, I can find the newspaper for you, that’s easy. Oh boy, it’s here this morning, we get to take it next door to my favorite neighbors! Maybe if I do a little wagging for them too I’ll get noticed again. And if I look real hard while we’re there I can spot that other cat come out of it’s hiding place.

Sure, you don’t have to ask me twice, I’d love to go for a ride to town, maybe we can walk in that neat area with all the tall buildings, oh the smells, the fun things to walk around! Harness me up - move you out! Maybe I can sneak in a short nap on the way.....

We’re here - let’s go! There’s those bushes that have all the neat smells. Oh Handler, can’t I please sniff a bit? All right, maybe there will more down by that grassy area with people seats. Here comes a place for Handler to pet me, we’re just about there, Halt! He stopped, now Handler will pet me and praise me. Aw shucks, it was nothing, I do it for you all the time now, but it sure is nice to get rewarded. Forward, sure, let’s go, follow me, stay by my side Handler, I’ll give you room to walk safely if you stay by my side. Oh the smells coming out of each of these doors, I wish I could follow my nose but I’m working right now, maybe another time. Hey, here comes one of those little humans more my size! See ya later, I can’t talk now, I’m working!

Ok, halt, I know that one, it means stand steady like I saw a bird. Oh I just love it when a stranger wants to pet me, but it gets me so confused when I’m working. I want to say hi to all of them, but I remember that time that I guided Handler into the street without stopping because that nice lady human was talking to me? I got in trouble for that one. So much to remember to make sure I guide Handler safely, sometimes he sees things and sometimes he seems to see nothing, so I gotta be his eyes and pay attention. Sometimes when we are alone Handler tells me that he is having a harder and harder time seeing and that he really appreciates me guiding him and how much he needs me. And he told me that I make him feel safe and independent, whatever that is. Aw shucks, I enjoy this working stuff! When we are walking down the street I hear all those other dogs stuck behind fences, and here I am, getting to go everywhere humans go just for the price of getting Handler there safely, what a life. I like being close to Handler all of the time because he depends on me. And he feeds me, takes me outside so I can sniff around when I’m not working. He rubs me all over and combs my hair everyday. Wow, he even rubs my teeth and gums every night with that good tasting stuff. Oh, it feels so good when he cleans my ears for me each week. When I try to scratch them myself it just isn’t quite the same.

I remember a long time ago when that nice girl human started taking me everywhere with her when I was little. I felt bad when she had to leave me when I got older, and at school too when those teachers who taught me how to be such a good guide had to say goodbye, but you know, now looking back, it was all worth it. I feel like now I am home, with a Handler that I can help to “see” the world, doing what I was raised to do.

Part 6

My, how life can have roads ahead where you do not know what is around the next curve. A year ago at this time I was just starting to use a white cane to navigate the perils that face a low-vision person. Having a guide dog was just a hope and dream to help me get around Forest Ranch and Chico more safely. I was just beginning to wonder what I would do once I acquired some of the mobility skills of the visually impaired world.

Here I am today, writing this article in Sacramento where I have been evaluating a training program through the Department of Rehabilitation during the past month. On August 5th I will begin a six-month training class that will prepare me to manage a food vendor service in a government facility.

How does this all relate to the path to a guide dog? Without my guide Galleon, this would really be tough for me to do on my own. Galleon gives me the confidence, security and safety to accomplish this. For the past month my days have been the following: Galleon and I leave the apartment here in north Sacramento and walk 3 blocks to the nearest light rail station. He guides me to the ticket vending machine, then on to the loading ramp. When the train arrives he guides me to an open seat, where he sits patiently during the 15-minute ride to downtown. When we leave the train near the Capitol, Galleon guides me one block east, then 3 blocks north to the Sacramento County Courthouse. He guides me always to the same door out of 8 to choose from, and then we go inside the lobby. There he waits on command while I go through the airport-style security, and then he goes through it when I call him. Then he takes me to the elevator button and onto an elevator when it arrives. Up at the 6th floor he takes me to the cafeteria where we spend the next 8 hours while I learn all about the food business. At the end of the day we reverse the morning route, all of this with rarely a command from me! With all of the people, poles, curbs, and other obstacles, he gracefully guides me around them, at a walking speed of everyone else on the streets, and often faster. When walking into buildings, where I am practically totally blind, Galleon takes me safely through this darkness to where we need to go.

When I started this series of articles last year I entitled them “The Path to a Guide Dog”. Now I am living “The Path **With** a Guide Dog”. I feel so blessed to live in a country with so much to offer to the disabled if you look for it. We have choices to make in life, and I am glad that I chose to embrace this second half of my life rather than succumb to it. Happy trails!

Part 7

If you've read my articles before, you might notice that I have changed the title to "The Path **With**" from "The Path **To**". Galleon and I have now been a team for over six months! In some respects it seems like we've been together for years, and in other respects it seems like a short time. As predicted by the instructor's, it takes about six months for us to really start gelling, and that is true. I am noticing that we seem to be communicating without words or actions. Galleon seems to be anticipating my moves before I do at times!

I am still finding that just about every time we are out in public that a lot of people do not understand many things about guide dogs, and I can understand that because I myself have rarely encountered a guide dog in public. So this month I thought I'd try to share a little more of what it's like to be guided by Galleon.

Galleon guides me everywhere I go in public, grocery stores, restaurants, church, post office, doctor's offices, public transportation, and yes, 'where the pets go – Petco'! Retinitis Pigmentosa, R.P. or tunnel vision, tends to allow us to sometimes think that we see better than we do, and that's when we get into trouble. So, yes, although I do not "look blind", I am not training Galleon to be a guide dog, he IS guiding me! As we walk through stores, I don't see many people's faces as we walk by but it is so neat to hear the comments about what a beautiful dog he is, and hearing mom's explain to their kids how he is helping me to see. I have later heard people say that they saw us at this store or that place, and were unsure about approaching us. Recognizing faces is getting harder, so please do not think I am being rude if I do not notice you first. The one thing about blindness is that many people are unsure about how to treat us, so often times blind people are passed by. If you see us, please say hi, ok? True, when Galleon is working and in harness he should not be petted or enticed, but he knows we are talking about him! Speaking of that, it was stated on a recent segment on TV that petting a working guide dog is like putting your hand over the eyes of someone driving a car. Serious stuff for sure, I place my total safety in Galleon's care, but he is learning to stand calmly while I visit with people.

Someone said that they saw us in the grocery store and watched to see how Galleon knew to show me where the pasta shelf was. Well, Galleon does take me straight to the bananas, and then on to the milk, and naturally to the ice cream, and lastly to the bread at WinCo without me giving him directions, but that is because we always make those stops. For other items I need to know where they are so that I can tell him how to get me there safely. I am so thankful that WinCo does not rearrange the store like Costco and Wal-Mart do!

I still cannot express into words what it is like to be able to get out into the world and walk down the street, or into a business and feel confident about walking safely. The one place that I do not feel totally safe is right here in Forest Ranch walking down our own road. There are so many dogs whose owners allow them to roam freely. There is no way for me to know if a loose dog is friendly or aggressive. Guide dogs are not aggressive in any way. Galleon is taught to guide me safely and that is it. If we were accosted by a loose dog Galleon would be in a tough situation because he would be in harness and on leash, and have the training to guide me as his first priority. He would have a tough time defending himself, and I would not see well enough to do much. Although there are federal and state laws protecting guide dogs and their handlers against dog attacks, and there are leash laws, I don't want to get into that situation.

Here are two recent incidents that show that Galleon is devoted and not afraid of water. Recently while in Sacramento Galleon was guiding me down a sidewalk where the lawn sprinklers were running nearby. The sidewalk was soaked but I could not feel any water hitting me. When we got to the end, I reached down and petted Galleon for a job well done and he was soaked! Also, as anyone knows that has been around us, Galleon wants to be by my side constantly. He now is allowed to often have the run of the house when he is not working, and recently after I got out of the shower and into bed, I reached down to pet him good night, and his head was soaked! He tries to stay so close to me, and now knows what is behind that curtain in the bathtub. What a dog, my Galleon.

Part 8

Greetings from the state Capitol. As many of my friends know I am going through a training program here in Sacramento with the Department of Rehabilitation, but some are not sure if this is training with Galleon my guide dog or what it is. Galleon and I went through the formal guide dog training last January at Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael, although we will always be learning things together no matter where we are! The training that I am taking now is called the Business Enterprise Program, or B.E.P.. This is a government- sponsored program for the blind and visually impaired started back in the 1930's. The training is preparing me to "own" and manage a food service business in a government building. It may be a snack bar, a cafeteria or a vending machine route. It is a six month classroom and on-the-job training that is teaching me all aspects of running a food business, including sanitation, menu costing, purchasing, taxes, supervision, merchandising, cooking and many other areas. There are over 200 of these businesses in California. Galleon guides me so effortlessly around the big city, to class, to OJT, on the light rail and to the bus depot, but I know that he enjoys it when we go home to Forest Ranch on weekends.

We came home this past weekend and I was reminded what a wonderful place Forest Ranch is. Although in Sacramento I have the luxury of public transportation available and a great training program, there is no place like home. One forgets how in the city there is constant noise; cars, trucks, trains, helicopters, jets, sirens, and if you listen real close you might occasionally pick out the chirp of a bird! The noise is 24/7. To sleep with the windows open is a real challenge. What I noticed at home was the silence, it was deafening in a beautiful way. To lay in bed at night and hear absolutely nothing but the sound of crickets was something to be treasured. To stand outside during the day and hear nothing but the birds singing, the squirrels chattering, and yes, even the breeze heard at the top of our majestic pines was truly music to my ears. We are so blessed to live in Forest Ranch. Sometimes we all get so wrapped up in life's struggles that we should once in a while just stop and listen to nature's free therapy.

Ok, a Galleon story to tell you about. Once we were trying to cross the street. As we stepped off the curb a car comes screaming around the corner and heads straight for us. So we walk faster, trying to hurry across the street, but the car changes lanes and is still coming at us. So we turn around to go back, but the car changes lanes again and is still coming at us. By now, the car is so close and we are both so scared and confused that we just freeze and stop in the middle of the road.

The car gets real close, then swerves at the last possible moment and screeches to a halt right next us. The driver rolls down the window. The driver is a squirrel. The squirrel says, "See, it's not as easy as it looks, is it?" (Gotcha readers!). So, the next time you are driving in Forest Ranch and see that squirrel in the road, remember this story!

I wish to thank those who have encouraged me to continue to write these articles. It was so heartwarming when at the recent Firemen's BBQ that someone told me that she enjoys them so much that she shared them with a visually-impaired relative in Nevada. That person was inspired so much by my experiences with Galleon that the person is now training with their first guide dog - wow, that is so neat. Galleon has become such a part of my life in a short time that so many things with him seem so natural now, but I will continue to share them with you.

Part 9

My, my, my, can you believe that it was a year ago this week that Galleon and I were joined together as a team? On Wednesday, January 8, 2002 I was given him as my guide dog and wow, the paths that we have already gone down since that day!

Besides normal daily activities, some of the things that he has guided me through are a crowded 4-day convention in San Mateo, a flight to Denver, Colorado to spend with our daughter and her family, trips to doctors offices, grocery and department stores, restaurants, church, community meetings, speaking engagements, family and social get-togethers, the list goes on and on. When we arrive at these destinations, he lays so calm and quietly that you don't even know that he is there. To sum it up, he guides me everywhere that I go, Galleon has become quite a part of my life. He is so devoted and concerned for me that my wife Bonnie has nicknamed him "Velcro".

And then there are the activities of the past few months. As many of you know I am going through training at the Department of Rehabilitation to own and operate a food service business. At the completion of training in March I will be certified by the National Restaurant Association in food service management, with additional certifications in supervision and vending machine business operations. Galleon has been right there by my side through all of the training in Sacramento as we spend time in the classroom and during On-The-Job training at various food service businesses in Sacramento. Some might wonder how a blind or visually impaired person can run a business – you would be amazed! Being visually impaired has only caused me to learn how to do things differently while still growing, learning and succeeding in life. I feel like I am starting the second half of my life, how refreshing and exciting that can be!

One thing that has been really neat is how Galleon (and I, as far as that goes), have adapted to going back and forth from the quiet rural mountain life here in Forest Ranch to the hustle and bustle of Sacramento with all of the noise, traffic, and "variety" of people as we travel around the city on the light rail and busses. In Sacramento we live in an upstairs apartment and he seems to adapt to the life there easily. I will say that he is more excited to go outside here in Forest Ranch though, but who could blame him? This visit during the Christmas holiday time has been exceptionally exciting for him because of all the snow that we have had. Whoopee, the smile on his face as he bounds through the snow, running around me in circles tying me up with his leash, burrowing his face in the snow drifts. But then when I put his harness back on him, he transforms himself back into the attentive working dog that he lives for, safely guiding me, being my eyes.

My Galleon, my Mr. G, you continue to amaze me.

Part 10

It has been months since my last article, so I thought that I'd bring you up to date. I completed the food service training with the Department of Rehabilitation in Sacramento in March. Galleon helped me get to all of the classroom sessions and to and from several training locations in Sacramento. Looking back I think of all that we experienced during those months, all of which would have been so much more difficult to do without my Guide Dog Galleon. The different State buildings we went to, the Sacramento Light Rail trains, busses, busy streets and intersections, "strangers" that we encountered (I use that term loosely!). The rain, the wind, the heat, all of the challenges. But he got me through it just fine without incident.

The week that I graduated from the training program in March I was blessed with a facility to immediately step in to. It is a snack bar/deli type of place in the State Teachers Retirement System (STRS) building in southeast Sacramento. Galleon guides me to and from work, about a mile walk each way from our city apartment.

When I started this series of articles over a year and a half ago, I wanted to share what it is like to be losing your eyesight and getting a Guide Dog. At that time I had no idea what I would be doing today, had never heard of this food service program that I am in, and the list goes on and on of unknowns. All I knew was that I had to recently quit my job, quit driving, and learn to cope with everyday tasks. With the love and support of my wife, parents, family and friends, the help from the Department of Rehabilitation, and most importantly God's blessings and Grace, I found that most anything is possible if you look ahead, not with one's eyes but with an open mind and a realization that we are only here on earth for a relatively short time. There are many opportunities available in life. Don't get me wrong, there are many frustrations, doubts and times of being tempted to give up and become a recluse, but then we all have our trials in life don't we?

My "change in life" began in the Spring of 2001 when I first came in contact with Deb McGarr of the Dept. of Rehab in Chico. She handles the Homemaker program for the blind and visually impaired, teaching and helping one coping with daily tasks and routines. In the summer of that year she arranged formal white-cane Orientation and Mobility training to give me more independence. The month of January 2002 I was at Guide Dogs for the Blind in San Rafael and was matched and trained with Galleon. After that it was time for another step, realizing that it was possible for me to get back into the business world, I was turned over to Catherine Oldham at the Dept. of Rehab. in Chico to explore vocational opportunities. It was there that I was pointed down the path to where I am today.

The rewards of operating a business, "Marcum's Eatery", where customers can come eat, relax and get away from the stresses of their office is so rewarding. For the first time in my life I am able to have a career and go to work to do a good job without my failing eyesight being a disability or major hindrance. That is what this program is all about, rebuilding lives. At 52 there is still a lot of life left in me and ahead of me, regardless of my deteriorating eyesight.

The walk with a Guide Dog is still incredible and fascinating. Hearing the comments of people as we pass by, the opportunities to talk about Galleon, the ability to go places that would be so difficult without his guiding. It is still so amazing to see the transformation when I place his harness on him, the dedication is indescribable and he knows it's time for him to use his skills. When the harness is off, he is one of the most devoted dogs a person could ever hope for. Galleon, Bonnie and I enjoy our time at home in Forest Ranch, there is no place like it! He is like a kid anxious to go outside and play, I wonder if he knows that fun snow stuff is coming again in a few months?

And the walk continues.....

Part 11

For the newer readers of the Forest Ranch Post who do not know me, I started a series of monthly articles in December of 2001 that described my path to getting a guide dog and about vision loss. It has been about a year since I last wrote so I thought that I would again check in with you all.

Like I had previously written, having Galleon as my guide dog has become a regular part of my life in that he guides me just about everywhere and it has become quite natural and routine, but still being absolutely incredible when I think about it. In January Galleon turned 5 years old and that made it 3 years that we have been together as a team.

Last June Galleon and I flew to visit my daughter and her family just outside of Washington D.C. Like he did on a prior trip to Denver Galleon traveled so well. He just settles in at my feet and sleeps most of the flight, except when the flight crew and other passengers stopped to admire and talk about him. While in D.C. Galleon guided me to many of the sights of our nation's capitol. We walked around the gates of the White House, past the Washington Monument, and through the WWII Memorial which had just opened the week before. We solemnly walked the Vietnam Veteran's wall, along the Reflecting Pool to the highlight of my sightseeing visit, up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. To get to actually be at all of these important places was hard to put into words. It was something that I thought that I would never get to experience.

In August we suffered a huge loss in the Marcum family, the passing of my dad Buster. Galleon has always gone bananas over women, but my dad was the exception for Galleon. He always got so excited when he saw my dad and I know that Dad really enjoyed and appreciated Galleon.

As far as my vision is concerned, it has continued to slowly deteriorate. But thank God not as fast as it was for a while because 3 years ago I thought that I might be totally blind by now. My eye disease, Retinitis Pigmentosa is that way, unpredictable.

I am so into country music that I decided to try my hand at songwriting. So, here goes, my first published song. Think the melody of "Oh My Darling Clementine" as you read the words.

*Oh my doggie, oh my doggie,
oh my doggie Gal-le-on*

*You are won-der-ful, you are ter-rif-ic,
you are my guiding eyes.*

That's ok, hold the applause, I'll keep my day job selling food.

Things are still fine with the business in Sacramento at Marcum's Eatery. We are located in the CalSTRS building, feeding the hundreds of State employees. Galleon has his bed there by the cash register where he sleeps and looks cute for all the customers. As time goes along, he seems more and more to be able to read my mind when guiding me. One thing that I have been realizing lately is that when we are in a store and we finish shopping, I tell him "Galleon, find a register for us". I let him guide and he never tries to pick a register that is closed, and generally picks an open one with the shortest line!

That's pretty much the latest from here. Bonnie and I sure miss all of you in Forest Ranch! Until next time, the path continues.....

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