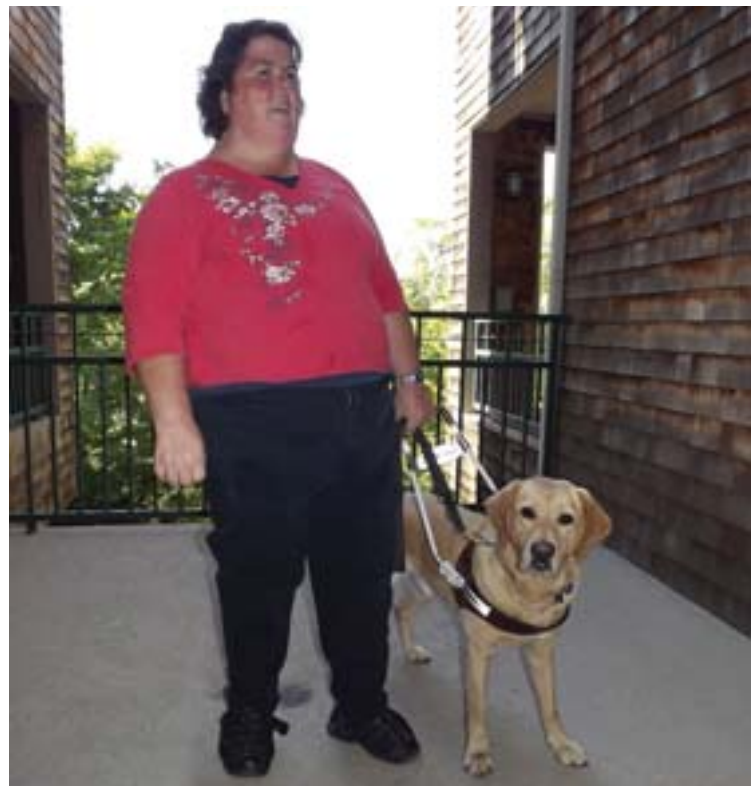


A Four-Footed Guiding Light

By Cathy Dausman



Laurie Van Allen with guide dog Danville Photo Cathy Dausman

Lafayette resident Laurie Van Allen is always in good company when she goes out. Her companion is a handsome young male named Danny. He is a former model – a 2009 “Mr. October” – who loves to hike and run, loves kids, and is “gaga over babies.” Van Allen and Danny are literally and figuratively “connected at the hip,” she says, because Danny, or Danville, is her guide dog.

Van Allen, who has retinitis pigmentosa, a condition which prevents her from seeing faces or colors, moved to the East Bay to attend the California School for the Blind. “I was a cane user for 22 years,” she says, “until I fell down the stairs at county hospital.”

She first applied for a guide dog in October 1999, and underwent rigorous medical testing and a home evaluation with a trainer. After acceptance to the program, Van Allen entered San Rafael’s Guide Dogs for the Blind school in 2000, and lived on campus to train for a month, learning techniques to work with her guide dog as a team and how to care for her companion. She was paired with Auckland, a male yellow Labrador retriever and the two worked together more than six years, until the dog was retired due to health issues.

Van Allen reapplied for a second dog and again underwent medical exams and a home evaluation, as she will do each time she requests a dog. She was given a female yellow Labrador named Prima, but Van Allen said Prima was a “poor fit.” After only six months Van Allen relinquished the dog, and it was retired from active

service. Van Allen waited 18 months for her next dog, Danville, because he was originally paired with someone else. While Danville was bred at the Guide Dogs for the Blind campus in San Rafael, he was raised in homes in Nevada and Oregon. Van Allen and Danville trained together at the Boring, Oregon Guide Dogs for the Blind campus.

Danville, whom Van Allen nicknames “Tigger” or “Mr. Houdini” when he jumps or misbehaves, was one of a litter of five yellow Labrador retriever puppies. Danville’s brother Duncan (littermate names all start with the same letter) is also a guide dog; brother Damon fathered several guide dog litters.

On the job, Danville wears a leash and a harness, and enjoys doing his work, says Van Allen, and he knows the location of every crosswalk button in Lafayette. The hard part is training the public to allow her guide dog to focus. People still want to interact with the dog even when Van Allen requires his full attention. “Always ask first. When my hand is on his harness, he’s working,” she says.

While Van Allen searches for employment she and Danville spend their days volunteering at Oakland’s Lion’s Center for the Blind and socializing with friends from Bay Area Outreach and Recreation Program and the Foggy Doggies group. Whether working, walking, riding busses or BART, the two are always together.

“I would be lost without him,” Van Allen says.

September is National Guide Dog Month

Guide Dogs for the Blind operates campuses in San Rafael and Boring, Oregon. The San Rafael campus breeds Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, and Labrador Retriever/Golden Retriever mixes for the guide dog program. A host of professional staff members, trainers, vets and volunteer host families work with the dogs from puppyhood through retirement. Over 10,000 teams have graduated from the program since its inception in 1942. For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, visit www.guidedogs.com. You can also read the 2007 Lamorinda Weekly story about guide dog puppy trainers at www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0108/pdf/LamorindaPuppyRaisersGiveofSelvesforGreatCause.pdf.

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