

LBS3E3 - To Dog or Not to Dog - With Samantha Moore and Anita Lournitus

Transcript

Sam: One thing that was really interesting for me was that I had gotten a new job. I had sort of started seeing a new partner and I had gotten Rockette. All at the same time.

Naomi: One of the things that you have to do with the dog that you don't have to do with the cane is teach the dog "Play with me", 7:00 AM walks, playing with toys, getting huffed at. I mean tell me more about some of the changes that having a dog has brought into your life.

Sam: Oh my goodness. Like, I'm so sorry that's not me, that's just my dog. You definitely think about travel a little bit differently.

Anita: You definitely want to have those good orientation skills. You are correct, Sam, orientation is super important. 'cause the dog is not going to direct you to where you want to go. I was working with somebody and they said, "Oh, the dog will just take me to wherever I want to go." And I said no this is not the case, the dog will eventually learn how to get to familiar routes, but ultimately, it's up to you, the user to be able to direct the dog to where you want to go.

Sam: And they even said that it really helped to reduce violence within the prison.

Naomi: Welcome to Living Blind. I'm your host, Naomi Hazlett, and this podcast is brought to you by BALANCE for Blind Adults, located in Toronto, Canada. This season of Living Blind is sponsored by AMI. Here at Living Blind we explore the perspectives and lived experiences of people with sight loss, and delve into barriers, challenges, and real-life strategies for living life to the fullest. A bit about our guests for this month: Sam is the Events Lead at Equal Voice, a multi-partisan organization which advocates for women and gender diversity in Canadian politics. She previously worked as an Officer of Education at Fighting Blindness Canada, and as the Curatorial Assistant for communications with Ingenium. When she's not working, she can be found drawing awesome works of art, and salsa dancing at the latest happenin' venues. She got her first guide dog, a golden yellow Labrador Retriever named Rockette, in March of 2022. Anita is a certified Orientation and Mobility Instructor with the Toronto District School Board. She previously worked as an O and M Instructor and Volunteer Coordinator here at BALANCE from 2007 to 2022. The three of us enjoyed a fun, free flowing chat, as Sam took us on a journey of the first year having Rockette in both her personal and professional life, the pros and cons of canes and dogs and what ultimately influenced her decision to get a dog after so many years. We talk about the application process from choosing a school and filling out the paperwork, matching the right dog for you and your lifestyle and evaluating the honeymoon phase, to determine if the dog is the one for you. Not unlike dating, am I right? For Sam and others like her, this also entailed going through the whole process during the pandemic, so what challenges did that present to clients, schools, O and M Instructors, and the dogs themselves? We also heard a fascinating story about Rockette's upbringing in prison. All this and more coming up on "To Dog or Not to Dog". Welcome to the show Sam and Anita.

Sam: Thank you,

Anita: Thank you.

Naomi: So I guess to get started Sam, maybe you can tell the listeners a bit about your journey with sight loss and how you got started with thinking about getting a guide dog.

Sam: Sure, so I was born with my condition. I have achromatopsia Umm the sort of short version is that I deal with a lot of amblyopia, light sensitivity, day blindness. nystagmus, stigmatism, no colour vision so really just different shades of grey. And my acuity, uh, actually quite interestingly enough I just got my eye doctor to measure sort of my best and worst case scenario. Up until this point, I've kind of only ever had my best case scenario recorded, which is 20 / 200 and that's sort of with all the best possible correction, lighting, ideal sort of space. And then I took the worst case scenario and I you know I asked him about it and he said sure like why not? And it measured at about 20 over 1000. So I thought that was really interesting because I had never had a way to describe it in a number. I really only had like my understanding of of shape and colour I guess to and my words to sort of use to explain to other people. So yeah, I I've had that my entire life. I started using a cane around 14. When you know when you start going out on your own, you want to go out with your friends. Your parents are sort of driving you places less and you want to be a little bit more independent. I had to start walking home from school because there were so many kids in my elementary school that I needed to start, you know walking home 'cause there just wasn't there wasn't room on the bus. There was a waiting list and so that was sort of what got me started with my own independent O and M skills. And I, you know, some people start sooner some people start later. I think it just depends on your amount of vision and you know what kind of city or town, that you're in and what you're you know your family is comfortable with as far as you going out and about. So I know that it's different, definitely different for everyone. And then I'd say pre-pandemic about 2019 I was feeling really settled. I had full time work. I was sort of starting to feel more comfortable with life after graduating and I really wanted a guide dog. So I started the application journey and here we are in 2022. It took a long time! This pandemic definitely had a huge huge way in shaping how long that you know that journey sort of took, but it was a really phenomenal one and I'm glad I took it. And so I think I'm just coming up on six months with my dog, Rockette.

Naomi: Oh congratulations. How's it going so far?

Sam: It's going really well. It definitely was a lifestyle change that I was not expecting. And I think everyone kind of tells you that it's going to be this crazy change in your life, but nobody really is able to tell you how. And I guess that's because it's so different for everybody. But she is phenomenal. She's very laid back. You know, we go out. We do our work 9 to 5. You know we come home and she just sleeps and she's like so content but she also gets some really good play time as well. So I like she's just a little cuddle bug and a bit sassy, I might add. She's she's quite sassy. She likes to sass me once in a while.

Naomi: How does the guide dog get sassy? I'm curious.

Sam: Oh she has this very distinct huff when she like if she has a toy and I won't play with it 'cause I'm on like a Zoom call or I'm doing something or, especially with working from home, I think she gets a little confused 'cause we sort of do 2 days in the office, 2 days from home. And for the summer, we've had Fridays off. So if I'm at home and she's like, "well, you're here... play with me" and she

doesn't think. And she'll do it when I'm on calls with people and I'm like "Oh my goodness, like. I'm so sorry that's not me. I'm not blowing off your idea... that's just my dog giving me the evil eye". So yeah, she's definitely very impatient with me sometimes.

Naomi: So what kind of dog is Rockette?

Sam: Rockette is 3/4 golden lab and 1/4 yellow Labrador retriever. I find that's generally the mix that most schools go to. There's black labs. A few schools do German shepherds. I don't think any in Canada do. I believe it's just Guiding Eyes and Seeing Eye and some other schools in the USA that have German shepherds.

Naomi: Well, Rockette sounds super adorable. I'm curious though, to take a step back and I'm wondering if you can walk us through what led you to think about to want to transition from using a cane as your main method of getting around to having a guide dog?

Sam: Uh, what's really interesting is I my cane skills are pretty good, but I also didn't always use a cane on a regular basis, and I think everyone drills this idea into your head that, like you have to have good cane skills, you have to have good cane skills. And almost want to rephrase that to like, you have to have good O and M skills. Because a cane can and can't help you in certain situations. That's different for everybody, so I would say like as long as you know how to orient yourself, like with traffic and with a sidewalk, and I know that's probably pretty dangerous. Like sometimes you know for some people, like yes. I can, you know, I know everyone goes through their phases of like denying the cane and like not wanting to use it because it's different. But I feel like that's also the transition to using one is different than figuring out, like realizing that you don't need it all the time, and I think that scares the sighted community and abled bodied community a little bit because they don't like when we take risks and everyone else is allowed to take risks. But yet when we do it, everyone is just like double terrified because they're like, no, don't don't do it. So yeah, I, I think it was real. The companionship was a big one and a lot of people said. Well, you know you can't. A guide dog isn't a cane. You can't fold it up and stick it in your purse. Or you can't, you know it. It poops and like it does all these other, like it's a living thing. And I really wanted that And like now that I did it, I'm so happy I did, because I have this little friend with me wherever I go. And you know, sometimes a pain in the butt, I won't lie. Like they all, they all have their days. Sometimes they're sick, sometimes you know they don't, they're you know, they have off days too. But think it was just the also the sighted guide like was became, you know, the cane bumps into the object and then you have to navigate around that object. Whereas with a dog, that transition is a little more seamless. Like the dog, just goes around the pylon or it goes around or the person or the obstacle and. You don't really have to work that out yourself all of the time so it's it's quite nice. I really enjoy it. It's it's a lot easier and I find myself more relaxed when I when I go out and I travel now.

Naomi: It's interesting, I don't know if I've heard anyone on the show or in my experience talk about this before that idea that you know you have to have amazing cane skills and you know you can't take risks. You have to stay with your cane instead of using other elements of the environment to, to get around, so that's something new I learned today.

Sam: Yay, I'm glad. I my O and M guide dog instructor is probably like "oh no" 'cause I know they're really adamant about it, and it's not that I think that that's a bad thing. Definitely safety comes

first and you know always practice. If you're practicing, like do it with another person, like have someone with you. Like don't just you know Willy nilly, be like "I'm going to go outside today without it, for the first time" Like you know what I mean? Like be safe obviously. But I do think there is a level of risk that we should be allowed to take. Like you know, when teenagers are learning to drive like, they go on the road and they're driving this car for the first time. They have someone with them to help, but they're also, they're still taking a risk. You still have a driver that's in a car that's never been in a car, like in the driver seat before, so I do think that's something I would love to see People maybe talk and debate a little bit more about, and like bring their opinions to the table, 'cause I feel like, yeah, nobody ever really talks about it. People avoid it like the plague.

Naomi: Yeah, I mean I should mention Anita is with us today to give us a bit of perspective as an Orientation and Mobility Instructor. Anita, do you have any thoughts about using the cane, cane skills? Are there other ways too that you teach people to get around in the community? Any thoughts on that or any thoughts on the differences between using a cane and using a guide dog.

Anita: Yeah, for sure. I think Sam sums it up really well. Uh, so I guess in terms of like using a cane, I guess in terms of recommending a cane uses like when you're really having a hard time seeing the path in front of you especially objects and drop offs, this might be a time to consider using a long cane or a guide dog. You definitely want to have those good orientations skills you are correct Sam in saying orientation is super important 'cause a dog is not going to direct you to where you want to go. I was working with somebody and they said "well the dog will just take me to wherever I want to go", and I said no, this is not the case. Um, you're still gonna be expected to do that right turn left turn, and locate those things you know on your own. The dog will eventually learn how to get to familiar routes, but ultimately it's up to the user to be able to direct a dog to where they want to go. And in terms of long canes we call it an obstacle detector I guess to some degree, because you are touching pretty much every obstacle in front of you in the environment, and some people who are more tactile users find that helpful because maybe it's you know that third post is what's going to tell me that I'm at, you know, my building. Whereas with a guide dog, they are obstacle avoiders so you don't, you have a bit of, well, you have less feedback with your environment. So you're relying more on your time, distance judgment, you know, knowing that you've walked for so long now it's time to cue the dog to turn right or turn left to find that door. So they're both different ways of traveling and both are a wonderful way. One is not better than another. Just comes down to personal preference. Like yeah! Sam summed it all. You kind of like did my whole lecture of what I talk to clients about. You know you can't put a dog in a corner you know, doesn't matter what the weather is, you gotta take that dog out. So there are pros and cons to both. I mean, I think it is good to be able to take some sort of risks when you're traveling. I feel like when I'm teaching clients I'm observing and watching and making sure that they are doing those risks in a safe way. I know some people may not necessarily like how we work when they're out there. Some people often will come up and grab the person who's on a lesson or tell me, you know you're such a mean person. Why did you let that person do that? But the only way you can really learn about The environment is to interact with it, and sometimes that is taking. I guess when I'm on a lesson a bit of a controlled risk, so to speak.

Naomi: Huh. Sam, has that ever happened to you, either with the cane or with the dog? People coming in and giving their two cents about how you're supposed to be getting around without really knowing much about how you do get around?

Sam: Oh yes. All the time, I definitely have more cane stories. Just 'cause I've been like a cane user for so much longer. And I find when you don't use a cane like, I think that's what a lot of people like, some people say, you know, don't, you shouldn't care about what other people think when people are sort of have like, I don't know, reservations using a cane. And it's not really about what people think. It's about how people act and what they do, because when you use a white cane or you identify yourself as someone with blindness or a disability or whatever, yeah, people touch you, they move you or they stop you from going somewhere when you're trying to go somewhere and I find the biggest one since I've gotten Rockette my guide dog, because they take you straight to the curb, cars get so nervous. I can, it's like I can feel the car, like the traffic that's sort of going from my left to right or right to left. I can feel them like haul on the brakes as they see me and I know she's going to stop. I know where we are stopping. Like I know the curb. Like I know the area and the intersection, but it's like I can feel that the hesitancy in some of the cars, or in some people who are like, "oh, I don't know". And you're like "it's fine, I'm not going to run into the road". Uhm, that that's a really big one. The funniest one that I notice is that all four ways of traffic will stop and won't go. At first I just thought it was a weird light, but my O and M instructor was like, "this is the weirdest thing I've ever seen". The traffic that's meant to be going won't go, and I don't know if it's a weird bylaw where I live, about like waiting for people to cross, you know, pedestrians to cross all the way or something, but I'm waiting for parallel traffic to go so that I know, like hey, I have this audio signal to cross with, and they're just sitting there. But when I don't use, you know when I, if I go out without her, that doesn't happen at the same intersections. So I found that one really fascinating, especially as someone originally from the GTA and where traffic is just madness all the time.

Naomi: Yeah, I was going to say as somebody who used to live in Toronto, that's hard for me to imagine, everybody stopping at an intersection in downtown Toronto.

Sam: I know, it's wild, it's very funny.

Naomi: So I know this may not be the most exciting part of the journey, but I think it would be helpful for people to know. I mean you said it took about three, you know years for you to from the time that you started the process to where you are now, you know, what took so long? What are all the steps that you had to go through?

Sam: Uh, so I also applied to multiple schools. I think that kind of impacted things as well. So I applied to CNIB Guide Dogs and Guiding Eyes for the Blind in New York. And my thought was sort of just, you know whichever one gets back to me first, whichever process sort of fits me the most. I liked both schools. And I knew people that had gone to both and recommended them. Some of them aren't as in depth. CNIB was a lot easier because I was already a client, so they had, you know, my doctor's notes and they know about, you know, your vision. And they kind of already know a lot of your needs. Whereas Guiding Eyes didn't, so they want to know, you know, you get the health form with like do you have asthma? Do you have... are you prone to heart conditions? How in shape are you? How fast do you walk? How much do you weigh? Uhm, what's your lifestyle like? Do you go out every Saturday night or, you know, are you home 80% or 90% of the time? Uh,

what kind of job do you have? Are you like, if you're a cleaner and you're around chemicals and stuff a lot. That's different than someone who works a 9 to 5 office job, like you sort of have to really evaluate your entire life and your health and see what the best choices for you. And so then once you finish that application process, they usually send someone out to see you know, your apartment or your house or where you live. What kind of environment you have? Who are you living with? Do you have other pets in the house? You know do you have a cat, do you have a fish? Do you have mice? Yeah, I mean like all that other stuff. And then I think about, uh, I'd say like almost six months a year or something like that went by and they do a test. So they bring out a dog or they do a Juno walk, which is where they have an empty harness. Maybe, you know, an O and M instructor takes the harness and you kind of do a couple of routes so they can get an idea of you know, how fast you walk or how slow you walk or whatever. And that was really fun. And then and eventually you get to the matching process when you bring a new friend and they say see how it goes. So Rockette and I did a little test weekend. She actually stayed with me for a weekend before we started training kind of as a "we'll see how this goes". And it was really great. I loved it even though it was very cold and I was very new to waking up at 7:00 AM to take her out to poop. In, in cold weather.

Naomi: Oh no. Yeah, hopefully she enjoyed the walk, even if you weren't too wild about it.

Sam: Yeah, no, I think she did.

Naomi: And so you. Mentioned, you know? 7:00 AM walks, playing with toys, getting huffed at. I mean tell me more about some of the changes that having a dog has brought into your life.

Sam: You definitely think about travel a little bit differently, one thing that was really interesting for me was that I had gotten a new job. I had sort of started seeing a new partner and I had gotten Rockette. All at the same time, like within the span of like a month. It was a lot, so I think I found that even though it was a really enjoyable experience, I think because of all the other things that were happening, it was a little stressful, 'cause I was really struggling to BALANCE like this new job and this new relationship and also this dog and like you kind of have to realize, OK, well, I don't want to... "Yes, I want to hang out with the new person that I'm seeing", but I also have the responsibility of like bonding with this animal. And you know and then the new job you're dealing with accommodations and asking for accommodations. But you don't really know what they are yet, especially 'cause she was my first one I didn't have and you know, I didn't know what worked for me just yet. But you know, of course there's yeah the 7:00 AM wake up feed. Take her out. Give her a toy. Let her have some playtime downtime. Get out the morning nerves before you go to work, Umm, having to work her every day so like if there's a day where you just want to lie in bed? You know Sunday morning if you had a big Saturday night, and you want to stay in bed until one in the afternoon? Oh or 11:00 o'clock. Like you still have to get up, feed her and take her out like you have to take care of a living thing and I think some people forget that. And I think I knew it, but I also it was a shock like the physical part of doing it was a really big change. Totally worth it! I would not change anything for the world. I love it but in the beginning it was a very big, very big lifestyle change for me.

Naomi: And you know you mentioned that whether it was in your personal life or at work, you weren't quite sure at first how having a dog a guide dog was going to change things, whether it was accommodations or you know, spending time with your dog versus spending time with others. So I

know it's only been six months, but do you feel like things have settled a little bit? Do you feel like you have more understanding of how Rockette fits into your life?

Sam: Oh, big time. So, so much better and like just the people it's also a good tester for the people that I bring into my life. Whether it's a job or friends or relationship or whatever because I've learned that the good people who want to genuinely be in my life for me will make that sacrifice and will be like, yeah she can hop in the back of the car and or, you know, I will take public transit with you so that we can work her today. Or I can drop you off at here to so that you guys can work a little bit if it's a day where like I'm out of town. We're not working and I still want to get some exercise and some working exercises in with her. And then you also, you know, run into people who are afraid of dogs and sort of problem solving with that, like people who are very nice and have no issues with you or her. But for example, there's someone in my office who is really afraid of dogs, so I wanted to be super respectful of, you know, she's letting me in her space, so I want to, I want her to also feel comfortable in this space, right? So making sure you have a separate space for Rockette and that she stays in my office. She doesn't go wandering around like you know, sniffing people's toes you know. I know that there's some people in my office that would love that. They'd be like, "oh my God". But they would get really excited. But you know, some people don't, don't like that and don't want it or they have allergies or so you have to be. You have to be. Flexible and I appreciate that everyone in my life so far has been extremely flexible and open minded.

Naomi: I'm glad to hear, and I think you made a really good point around. You know, I don't think anybody has very strong feelings one way or the other about a cane, at least as far as I know. But when it comes to living things. It's important to, you know, keep everybody's needs in mind. But it sounds like you've figured out how to, how to make it work.

Sam: Yeah, and I think my workplace has been so great like they have been so accommodating and like you know, even the people who are maybe allergic or like you know, it's OK. Like, I'll just, you know I'll stay over here or you know we'll do a zoom call instead. Like there's so many options that have been really great. And I find people run into issues when people aren't willing to test out the other options and they're not flexible. If you're flexible then you know accessibility can really can really work for everybody.

Naomi: You mentioning zoom reminds me because you know you went through this process in a very unique time during the pandemic. Not that you had a guide dog or went through this process of getting one before the pandemic, but did the pandemic kind of make anything, did you happen to have to adjust the process in any way?

Sam: I think. It just made it a lot slower. And think I got to this point, especially when I was like, you know, when we were on lockdown and stuff started to latch on to positive things. That sort of kept me going and like waiting for a dog was one of those things. So, and I think that just made it even more like, oh, I just really want one so badly. So it was really cool when it finally happened. I would say the other thing that's really interesting is I don't know if I'm the only one, I do know a couple people that have kind of mentioned this, but, and people who have been guide dog handlers before say that like the COVID dogs are a little harder with the distractibility because like they if they were puppies for like 2019, 2020 and 2021 like. You know, like I think. She Rockette was born in summer of 2019. So really, by the time she got to training it was harder. She didn't, she hadn't gone on a plane before or there were some things that she couldn't do because

everything was so shut down. That it was harder to get past the distractibility with her almost, and that's just sort of the selection of dogs that was coming through for everyone. Like I don't think that was a one school challenge, I think that was sort of a challenge across the country and you know, even with Guiding Eyes, I think at one point they had like a huge case of kennel cough and like their staff were trying to relocate the dogs because staff couldn't be on campus during the pandemic. there was all sorts of stuff that I think every school had like its own its own challenges. So that was very, very interesting. So yeah, she's like just happy to be out of the house. Sometimes I find she's so, just so excited because she has probably spent so much time inside. So fun fact about Rockette is that her puppy raiser was actually in prison. They in the southern states have a puppy raising program for inmates, either like an individual inmate or a team of like five or six of them and sort of as their volunteer community service. Or you know, to help go towards probation or rehabilitation for them depending on what they're in prison for, what they've been charged with, they raise puppies and apparently they're like some of the most successful dogs that they have, 'cause they had they spend so much time with their handler. And the handlers just put you know everything they have into them. So she yeah, she was actually raised in a correctional centre. I believe in Mississippi, I'm not too sure. I don't know the exact one and I don't even know the name of the person or if it was multiple people like a A-Team of them or anything like that. But I got to write them a letter. I believe they even you know took a couple of the details to keep everything like very private and very, I don't know confidential I guess and never really heard anything back. I don't think they would have been allowed to write back. I'm not too sure but yeah, yeah definitely really grateful to whoever they are.

Naomi: That is very interesting. I think that I'll only speak for myself as a sighted person. I am imagining you know a beautiful manicured lawn and a campus, and you know a little institution, like a college where they have the CNIB trainers, so I think that's important for people to know that you know guide dogs are trained in lots of different places, and I think that's a really cool program.

Sam: Yeah, and they, they even said that it it really helped to reduce violence within the prison. Like even like between either between inmates or between guards and inmates. Like any any of that stuff like everyone was just lighter and more positive and happy and like willing to help each other out. So I thought that was really fascinating too that it's sort of rewarding for both the dog and the people that are putting in all this hard work. Like these trainers and these puppy raisers that are volunteering, you know?

Naomi: Yeah for sure.

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Naomi: Anita, I'm wondering if you have any thoughts on anything that you noticed during the pandemic in terms of differences with how people were navigating, how people are managing, having a guide dog, were there any challenges that your clients faced.

Anita: So first of all, Sam, that's amazing. I I've never ever knew about that, or that, that's how. Like, I know, puppies go to different raisers, but I never would have thought that it would have gone to a correctional facility for puppy raising. That's amazing. Sorry, back on topic so I guess in terms of

navigating, a lot of clients continue to wait and have experienced the delay that Sam has, in terms of getting a dog. I know we have started the process prior around same time, I would say around 2019 and they're still waiting for a dog. So people have multiple applications into different schools. It's just been a slower delay. Now in terms of like actual navigating and learning? I personally found it a little bit easier in teaching clients, particularly those I guess with canes. It's just that's just the majority of the clients that I work with, a lot of them are cane users. I do have the occasional dog guides, but the majority were cane users and I found that it was a lot easier to train during the pandemic because people weren't going out and those that didn't want to go out, the subways and the buses were less congested so you were able to learn in a quieter environment. So that was one of the biggest pros I found, was that you were able to really take that time to learn the station without having the crowds of people navigate around you. And in terms of, I guess, guide dogs. Nothing that that stands out; just the ease of traveling without dealing with the crowds of people.

Naomi: Thank you yeah. I mean I hadn't thought about that. The pandemic making it easier in some ways to travel, but I guess it affected people in different ways and it sounds like it affected the puppies to some extent. From what Sam's heard, it's going to be interesting to see how things evolve as we move forward. I guess one thing we haven't touched on yet is you know Sam, you've talked about how, and Anita, you talked about how the dog, by having a guide dog helps you get from point A to point B and helps you move around obstacles. And talked a little bit about how guide dogs are different from using a cane, but I guess the. One of the things that you have to do with the dog, that you don't have to do with a cane, is teach the dog how to get from point A to point B. So Samantha can you tell us a little bit about how training with routes works with.

Sam: That's a hilarious question and I love it. 'cause yeah, you don't have to train a cane, you just use the cane. Uh, the biggest thing I didn't realize was like the hand and feet positions, as well as the verbal commands. Like I knew you gave the dog directions, I think I just didn't realize to the extent that those directions went as far as physical and verbal and then the it's almost like you're thinking out loud and in your head at the same time, if I had to describe it in a way. Because you're literally trying to think like, oh, I'm going to work. Oh, like do I want to get coffee? Or you're thinking about like a report that you have to do and then you're also like left, forward, heel, like right or like you know, about, like whatever like commands that you're sort of going as you're doing your route. And then it's even more distracting when, when people are trying to call out to you or talk to you, 'cause you're not even, it's not like you're just like la-di-da and you don't hear them. It's like you're trying to specifically concentrate on "OK, what intersection am I at? Do I need to turn here? Do I need to... is she distracted?" Like, do I need to make sure that I don't miss a correction because that's how you know you're training gets sloppy and then down the road you notice they're you know, looking for food more often, or something like that. Like it, there's so much that you need to do, and then the hands and feet. My favorite one and I'm sure every school does this differently, but my favorite one is if you get to, uh where you need to turn left but the curb is sort of... how do I explain this? I guess like if cars are turning right, you don't want to turn left like pretend, especially 'cause so many curves aren't like an edge now, they're kind of just seamlessly, they go into the road. So you pat your right hand on your right leg and say left and you turn to the right in like a circle until you're facing essentially, like almost 360 degrees away around and you're facing the left direction you want to go. But people look at you like you're a mad person because

you're sitting there going left, left left, and you're turning around in a circle to the right. And people just don't get that and so I think some people get a little confused by it. And even I was confused trying to grasp like all the different little movements so that you don't end up bumping into traffic. Or stepping off the curb a little bit when you when you shouldn't be.

Naomi: I didn't know, well that for one, and you also mentioned that different, is it true Anita, that different training centres have different commands? Like I imagine that makes sense, but yeah, is it something you experienced?

Anita: I would say that there's slight differences, definitely in commands. Like I feel like maybe they might be slightly different for different schools, and as well as making those turns at curb cuts. I know some people like once you let's say you're traveling, maybe north I guess, right, and you want to go I guess left and you have to go up to the curb and then from there step back and then make that turn. Kind of like what Sam was saying, but those are slightly different, and every school is slightly different. I've worked with one client who went to the dog school in Quebec, and the commands were all in French. I thought that was really neat, so she's talking to her dog in French and I'll always remember, like the "pay attention... preter attention". I'm like, oh, that's so cool! But we're not used to listening to here in Toronto, you think French is used in other places. So, so there are slight differences with schools for sure.

Naomi: And Anita, do you have anything else to add for how route training goes? It sounds like, you know, Samantha, you were talking about how you are actively giving cues or commands to your dog as you're traveling along your route, but you know, is there anything more to it? I assume there's some practice as well that you have to do.

Sam: Oh yeah, yeah, I would say it's definitely more like muscle memory now, but before, like it took me a couple months to like fully feel in the groove even after graduation. I think that's the other thing. People assume that when you graduate, it's a perfect dog, and you never have to do anymore work ever again. And it's not. It's so much work, especially the first year. I think that's the other thing I wasn't aware of is how much energy and how strict you have to be that first six months to one year of your partnership. It's more of an investment than just, you know. It's not like just going and buying a perfectly trained dog that's perfect all the time.

Naomi: Anita, any other thoughts on that subject.

Anita: Yes, I do. So in terms of like our role as an Orientation and Mobility Specialist, usually what we do is we assist the handler to work with their dogs - so we never interfere with the training. If there's any issues with the dog, that's always going to go back to the school, but let's say, you know, Sam needed a new route, and she wasn't familiar with it herself, so we're pretty much coaching her on how to be able to coach her dog or training around how to coach her dog. "So this is the layout, you're going to listen for this noise here on the right and turn at that point". That way she can then give the commands to the dog, so I won't, I won't ever do the commands for dogs when I'm doing route training. Sometimes I'll be like "R-R" now do the "L-L" or whatever, do something you know, that it's coming up and they can tell the dog themselves. Um, just a bit of prompting in terms of, of their training. And I feel like different people work differently with their dogs. I've worked with clients who rely heavily on treats. Some clients, use a clicker. And some clients just you know, use words I guess so they'll like rub the dog, you know, say good dog or great job, or

whatever. So there's so many different ways that clients interact with their dogs, and it's really neat to see. And sometimes it is, I feel school based. Not every person I work with uses a clicker. I feel like that's specific to maybe certain schools. I don't know, Sam, did you work with a clicker at all in your school?

Sam: I did actually, and it's super helpful. I find 'cause we do treats and clicker and praise, so we're kind of like a mix of of everything. And I found when I use the clicker, I find she absorbs it a little bit faster, whereas with treats it takes for like three to four times or even five times the first time. But with the clicker, and I think just because she constantly associates the clicker with food that when she hears the clicker, she's like, "oh OK, this is good". And like by the second time, she's usually really, really good with whatever the command is.

Naomi: So I feel like we have a better understanding of, well the whole thing right? From thinking about having a dog, to applying for one and getting one, and those growing pains. All the way to learning a route. I think the last thing I want to ask you about, Samantha, is, what advice do you have, now that you've gone through this? And of course you know you're still six months in, but I'm sure those six months have been quite the ride. What advice do you have for people who are listening in and thinking, you know "I'd like a guide dog, but you know, how do I know it's a good fit for me"? What are some important things that I need to keep in mind?

Sam: I would say that once you have the dog, like, I would say be be strict like be adamant you know, not necessarily strict with the dog... would be realize that it's going to be a lot of work and you know, put in the work 'cause it will pay off down the road. If you slack, that will also show down the road. As far as the application process, don't be afraid. Like if when your school does come back to you, 'cause some schools give more notice than others, some say you know, "we have some dogs coming up in the next six months are you free, you know December to March". But then other schools will just be like "we have a dog for you like right now". Uhm, so don't be afraid of it. It's so hard not to get attached. I was in love with Rockette like the moment I met her. So it's very hard. I think any handler will tell you this, or anyone who's like gone through the process will tell you that you can get attached very quickly, but don't be afraid. Like there will be a dog out there for you. If the first one, even if you love it, if there is something about it that isn't working, don't be afraid to say so. You know, like don't be afraid to see what else is out there because it's something that's going to be in your life for a long time, like potentially 5 to 8 years like, or or two years, like whatever it is, it's, that's a big chunk. And so it shouldn't be something that you rush through just 'cause like, I really want a black lab and this is a black lab. But you know, maybe it's too high energy, or too low energy, or too slow, like don't fake it for the frivolous details, or you know some stuff like that. Like pick a partner that's really, genuinely, good for you in your lifestyle.

Naomi: So I've never had a guide dog, but I have had dogs and I do know that when there's a dog around, it definitely brings a different side out in people. And I also know, you know from my experiences, talking to people with guide dogs or just seeing how people interact with folks with guide dogs that. You probably have to deal with. You know, people coming up to you, people talking to you. Can you tell us a little bit about how having a guide dog has changed things from you? Kind of from a social perspective going around into the community.

Sam: Of course. That is a really interesting question, because I find that there's a lot of layers to that question. And the first one is yes, dog people, you know get super excited, and obviously want to

pet your dog. There's the basics of people being like "oh can I can I play with her? Does she get playtime?" But they're so concerned about her wellbeing, which is good. That it's really nice that people you know, like to think about that and like to make sure that even though this animal has a job, they also want to know about the rest of its care and you know, it's well-being and stuff. But the one thing that that I would say that gets... and I have mixed feelings about it because I actually really like it. But it is a little degrading when people, especially people you're meeting in a professional manner, acknowledge the dog and not you. That's a little weird. If it's both, or if it's you first and then the dog, or you know what, even the dog and then you, whatever. But when they acknowledge the dog, and not you, it's a little weird. It feels... I personally don't mind it as much because I'm so used to the negative energy that sometimes comes along with having a cane, like a bit of the harassment, especially from men who are like oh, she can't see me. Or you know, people who just assume you need help and that you're helpless and they need to pull you and take you across the street and meanwhile you're like "actually I was going east, not west, but whatever". It's so, there's like, or I don't know, whatever it is, you know? There's a lot of little things. So anyway, I find there's a lot of negative attention that can come with a cane, and so a dog is a nice break from that because finally, people are... it's not only a change in negative to positive attention, but its also not on you and your disability. It's on the animal and the positivity that animal is bringing to your life. That's also frustr... even though that's a really nice sentiment, that's also frustrating within itself because it means that people are more positive to animals than they are to people with disabilities, which is also a really degrading thought that I don't like to think about but it's there. It's a reality. Like it's very true, and again I'm not even just talking about like, people on the street. These are people you meet in professional environments sometimes, and not necessarily my job right now, but just when you're out and about and you're interacting with a business, like as a customer, you know what I mean? Like you're trying to receive a service or food or whatever it is from your environment and people are very odd. Ironically enough, I've actually had a great experience going into hotels and museums and venues for site visits, to either, you know, get a better idea of what a space looks like for an event, or to talk to a caterer, or whatever. I've actually had really positive experiences. I don't know what it is. I was expecting it to be horrendous because of some of my experiences with going into businesses as a customer, like you know, that sort of angle. But as a client, to client I find it's a little bit better. But anyway, yeah, that's sort of my rant of the day. It definitely changes how people see you and talk to you.

Naomi: There's a lot of nuances there, wow. I mean, no wonder you have mixed feelings. The relief.

Sam: I, yeah.

Naomi: Like the relief of "oh, I don't have to... people are enjoying my dog, and there's this positivity. But where was that before? Huh." yeah?

Sam: Yeah, yeah.

Anita: Sam, I think you said it all really. It was amazing hearing you talk about your experience, um. There was some, a lot of things I've learned about your experience that I haven't heard about before. So thank you for sharing all of that.

Sam: Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. You too as well!, I honestly love hearing from O and M Instructors! It's always so fascinating.

Anita: Aw, Thank you.

Sam: It is! It is! It's really great work.

Naomi: Well, thank you both so much for being on the show. Thank you Samantha for walking us through what life is like with Rockette, and what led you to that decision. And you know, Thank you Anita for lending your expertise about the orientation and mobility perspective. Where can people find you Samantha, if they want to get in contact with you.

Sam: I like to be a social media ghost, but if people would like to follow Rockette they are happy and welcome to do that. I do keep pretty active on her Instagram page. Its @Rockette_CNIBGuideDog, and that's on Instagram so that that's where you can find us If you want to reach out.

Naomi: Well again, thanks so much for your time Samantha. I wish you and Rockette all the best on your adventures together and thanks again for coming on the show.

Sam: Yeah, thank you so much for having me. It was really nice getting to know you too as well, Anita.

Anita: It was a pleasure Sam. I really enjoyed it. Thank you.

Naomi: And just like that, that's gonna do it for another episode. We're glad you could join us! I really hope that you enjoyed this interview with Sam, Anita and Rockette, as much as I enjoyed doing it for you. We've got everyone's contact info, plus further reading on guide dogs in the description below. Special thanks to Samantha Moore, Anita Lurnitus, our Producer Jeffrey Rainey, Executive Producer Deborah Gold, and the entire team at BALANCE for Blind Adults. feel free to subscribe and give us a rating and review on whatever platform you're listening on, and don't forget to let us know how we're doing! You can find us on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter by searching BALANCE for Blind Adults, along with the Living Blind Listeners Facebook group. You can also email the podcast with any comments, questions or suggestions you might have, at LivingBlindPodcast@BalanceFBA.org. For more information about BALANCE for Blind Adults and our programs and services, or to access the show notes and transcription of this episode, please visit us at www.BALANCEfba.org. I'm Naomi Hazlett, and this has been Living Blind, To Dog or not to dog. Thanks for listening.

Jeffrey: Hi, Jeffrey Rainey here. Producer of Living Blind. And I'm joined by Deborah Gold, our Executive Producer and the Executive Director of Balance for Blind Adults. How are you, Deborah?

Deborah: I'm great, thanks Jeff.

Jeffrey: We are wrapping up this year's Because of BALANCE campaign, which listeners have been hearing about over the past few months and we wanted to provide you with one final update. So how did it go this year?

Deborah: Well it was amazing. It was our best campaign to date. Not only did we have the most storytellers ever, but we raised the most we've ever raised over \$42,000.

Jeffrey: Incredible! Is there anyone special you wanted to mention?

Deborah: Well on top of our 29 fundraisers, the storytellers who worked really hard telling their own stories and the story of BALANCE and the work we do, we also had an anonymous donor that

matched every gift made during the last 10 days of the campaign. Their generous gift really lifted us up this year. Hey Jeff, you were actually one of our storytellers. How did you enjoy the month?

Jeffrey: Yeah, it was really great to be able to share my own story and experience with BALANCE. And to highlight the Living Blind podcast as one of the many programs that are funded by this campaign. And then sort of coming full circle, by using the show as one of our grand prizes.

Deborah: Yes, what a cool idea! To give people the opportunity to curate an episode next summer. It's going to be really fun to hear the perspective of those grand prize winners as they introduce and, well, first, they'll select and then introduce one of the episodes from the past three seasons. And those prize packages didn't stop there. We got some amazing donations. And we need to thank those product owners for contributing to the prize packages for the campaign. So a big thank you to Humanware Canada, Optelect, Accessible Media Inc and Clean Logic for their support in thanking our storytellers. And, of course, so much gratitude to all the listeners and donors that made a gift this year. because of BALANCE, we are going to support individuals with sight loss wherever they are on their journey.