

Ernie's story -

I have had the privilege to be partnered with two of the dogs KSDS has bred and trained.

I was diagnosed with juvenile wet macular degeneration in 1997. Due to the retinal scarring and continual hemorrhaging, I lost the use of my left eye and was declared legally blind in 1998. This caused me to take an early retirement from my career in Law Enforcement. I soon found that being unable to see well put a severe limit on what I was able to do. I went into a very deep, almost terminal depression.

I had been shown how to use a guide cane, but was still limited as to mobility. Every time I tripped, or fell, or had a near miss from a car made me more depressed. I finally got to a point that I found excuses to not do anything but sit at home.

A friend suggested that I get an assistance dog. He helped me research them on the Internet and I found that of the thirteen schools for guide dogs, at that time one, KSDS, was located in Kansas. I sent several query letters out to schools all over the country, but was answered in less than a month from KSDS with information about their program and an application. As I recall, that was in May of 1999. In June, I was invited to the facility at Washington, Kansas for an interview. That was a very easy process and helped me to be more at ease. I was still not sure that I needed or wanted a guide dog. At the end of the interview the KSDS staff evaluated my cane mobility. I was then allowed to 'test drive' A DOG. THAT CONVINCED ME. I NOT ONLY NEEDED, BUT ALSO DESPERATELY WANTED ONE OF THESE DOGS. For the first time in over two years I was able to walk with my head up, and at my old stride instead of the bent, hesitant shuffle I had adopted so I could watch my feet.

I returned to KSDS in September of that year and got my first guide dog. During those three weeks of training I not only learned to care for my new partner, but I also learned all the legal aspects of assistance dog use. Even more importantly, I met other people who had similar vision problems and some who were worse off. For me anyway, this was just as important if not more than the assistance training.

My first partner, Sooner, passed away in 2003. The staff at KSDS was so supportive and helped me greatly in my grieving process. I was so impressed with Sooner that when I got another dog, Neville, I went back to KSDS. I have been made to feel a part of an ever-growing family there. I have met people over the last few years that are using dogs from other facilities and I have just not been very impressed by the dogs I have seen from other schools. They are just trained dogs. Both of my partners have become extensions of me seeming to know what I want them to do without me doing

much of anything. That speaks to the very high quality of breeding as well as intense training.

KSDS is the only school that I have heard of that tries to match the dog with the user by personality. How they were able to do that after an hour interview is something I cannot figure, but they have gotten it right for me twice.

Oh by the way, after I was partnered with my first dog, I was able to go back to work because of the confidence I had regained. I am still working part-time and have been trying things that I never thought I would be able to do again. This is all due to the excellent staff at KSDS and the treatment and training I was given by them.

Sincerely,

Ernest J. Mazza