In August 2016, NBC and its morning program TODAY partnered with America’s VetDogs – sister organization to the Guide Dog Foundation – to raise a future service dog on air as part of their “puppy with a purpose” program.

Working with Olivia Poff over the following 16 months, black Labrador Retriever Charlie quickly became a viewer favorite as Poff socialized him to new experiences, and taught him good house manners and basic obedience. Together they made appearances around the country as Charlie learned how to behave in public.

As he grew, Poff and Katie Ruiz, a VetDogs service dog instructor, began teaching him specific service dog tasks that he would use when finally paired with a disabled veteran.

In December 2017, Charlie was placed with retired U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant Stacy Pearsall, a combat photographer who had been deployed to Iraq and elsewhere to document the work of military personnel around the globe.

Charlie’s popularity with the viewers and staff alike, and his and Pearsall’s success as a team led NBC to pursue another “puppy with a purpose” with the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs.

(continued on page 6)
I’d like to use my first column in The Guideway to introduce myself to the Guide Dog Foundation family of donors, volunteers, and other supporters. I am pleased to join the organization as the new president and chief executive officer, succeeding Wells B. Jones, who retired after close to 30 years at the helm.

My introduction to the Foundation proved to be both eventful and fruitful. I met with our staff and was immediately struck by how passionate all the employees are about our mission.

I’ve learned already that there’s no such thing as snow days when it comes to taking care of the dogs who live on campus, thanks to the late March nor’easters that kept hammering Long Island. If a storm is predicted to be bad, we arrange for kennel staff to stay the night in the student residence just in case we need to close the office, and staff members who live in the six houses on campus also pitch in when needed.

I had the opportunity to observe guide and service dog training, and I was impressed by how dedicated our instructors are and how smart these dogs are. The dogs can be taught to maneuver around obstacles and stop at curbs, or how to retrieve dropped items and push automatic door buttons for someone in a wheelchair (just two of the many tasks they can be trained for). I’m looking forward to my first blindfold walk to gain a little understanding of what it’s like to work with a guide dog.

And, of course, I met puppies. I stopped by our breeding and development center to visit with some puppies and meet some of the volunteers who work with them. I’m discovering that it’s not only the staff who are passionate about the Guide Dog Foundation. Carol Tepper, the puppy volunteer I met, has been a puppy raiser, is a former board member, current breeder caretaker, and a major donor to both the Guide Dog Foundation and its sister organization America’s VetDogs.

Last – but by no means least – on my whirlwind opening week was my introduction to Sunny, the “puppy with a purpose” and his puppy raiser and trainer Olivia Poff. TODAY has once again partnered with the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs to raise a puppy on air, but for this “season” of the Puppy With a Purpose program, we’re also raising puppies at local NBC stations in Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, and Los Angeles. You can follow Sunny and his littermates – the Class of 2019 – on our website and all our social media platforms.

I am grateful for the trust and confidence the boards of directors have placed in me to take the Foundation and VetDogs to the next level as leaders in the assistance dog movement, and I welcome your presence and continued support of us and the people we serve.

John Miller
President & Chief Executive Officer
Guide Dogs Changing Lives

Samantha Ambrico and Matthew Lipsey were profiled on NBC’S TODAY as Sunny, the newest “puppy with a purpose” was introduced to America. Learn more about these two remarkable people whose guide dogs have allowed them to live without boundaries.

Samantha Ambrico

Guide Dog Foundation students must be at least high school age before they are accepted to train with a dog because we want to ensure they are ready to handle the responsibilities of being a guide dog user; for 15-year-old Samantha Ambrico, that couldn’t happen soon enough.

Ambrico has a rare eye condition called Leber’s congenital amaurosis, which is characterized by severe loss of vision at birth. In Ambrico’s case, she is colorblind and light-sensitive, and does not have peripheral vision.

Training with a guide dog fulfilled a dream she had had for so long, she says. It built up her confidence and helped educate others about visual impairment and blindness. She was so happy, she reports, when she trained with her dog Laurel. “In school, I was known as the ‘girl with the dog,’” she laughs.

Laurel even attended Ambrico’s high school graduation and walked across the stage with her when she received her diploma.

Ambrico has never let her blindness limit her life. As she says in a video profile, she began dancing at the age of 3 because “my mom knew she needed to get me involved in some sort of physical activity. It was the perfect outlet for me to express myself.”

It was not without its challenges. Ambrico and her parents were forced to confront dance teachers unwilling to take the time and energy to develop

Matthew Lipsey

When Matthew Lipsey was 6 years old, his mother noticed that when he read a book, he would hold it so close that it was touching his nose.

An eye exam determined the boy’s vision problems went beyond glasses. Lipsey was diagnosed with Stargardt disease, which is an inherited disorder of the retina that manifests itself during childhood or adolescence. As it progresses, an individual will experience a decrease in central vision and loss of color perception.

Although Lipsey’s vision loss advanced fairly quickly, it had stabilized by the time he was 13. He is legally blind today but has some residual vision. He can see objects clearly only if they are a foot or closer.

Once they had received a diagnosis, Lipsey’s family sprang into action. They informed his teachers to ensure the proper accommodations would be in place once he really needed them. He credits this early intervention for his academic successes.

Lipsey went to Space Camp for the Visually Impaired in Alabama beginning in the fourth grade and attended every year until he was a senior in high school. As a young teen, he also participated in a program called Global Explorers, where he hiked the Grand Canyon and...
Sunny, the future guide dog who appears on NBC’s TODAY morning show in New York, was the headliner at a kick-off event for the Class of 2019 – the five puppies from the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs who are part of NBC’s “puppies with a purpose” program. Mutual of America, which has supported the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs for years, generously hosted the event in their offices in Manhattan.

Olivia Poff with Sunny (left) and retired Air Force Staff Sergeant Stacy Pearsall with Charlie (right) were among the guests of honor at the event. Charlie, the previous “puppy with a purpose,” was placed as a service dog with Stacy in December 2017.

VetDogs graduate retired Army Command Sergeant Major Gretchen Evans (left), who serves on the boards of directors for the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs, presented a custom woodgrain flag to Ally Homa from Pet Valu, in recognition of the company’s long-standing support for America’s VetDogs.

Wells Jones addresses the guests during the evening’s program.

In one last burst of winter, a nor’easter dumped more than 12 inches of snow on our campus in Smithtown, New York, even though spring had officially started the day before. Canine care workers and trainers all pitched in to shovel out the kennel runs.

This little guy knows how to travel in style during a snowstorm.

Photos by William Krol
In March 2018, the Guide Dog Foundation bid farewell and best wishes to Wells B. Jones, president and CEO, who retired after leading the organization for close to 30 years.

The students at St. Peter of Alcantara School in Port Washington, New York, led by their teacher Merilee Lehmuller (back row, far right), worked for three years to raise $6000 to sponsor a puppy for the Guide Dog Foundation. Jaime McGarde, Guide Dog Foundation’s community fundraising/events manager, and Carolyn Giambalvo (front row, far left), Foundation graduate and consumer services assistant, visited the school to thank the students for their hard work and dedication to helping people who are blind or visually impaired. The students plan to name the puppy Cody.

We always need puppy raisers to provide loving homes to raise puppies that will grow up to become future guide or service dogs. To learn how you can become a puppy raiser and change a life, go to Puppy.GuideDog.org.

In honor of their commitment and support of the Guide Dog Foundation’s inaugural Dogs on the Catwalk event, Jaime McGarde, the Foundation’s community fundraising/events manager, presented Nicola Zotta, president of Marchon Eyewear, with a commemorative plaque.

2018 is the Year of the Dog in the Chinese lunar calendar. The Guide Dog Foundation was invited to talk about guide and service dogs and assistance dog etiquette as part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Lunar New Year festival. Events like this are part of our public education outreach efforts.

Photos by Rebecca Eden
For 2018-19, however, they wanted to feature a different type of assistance dog. We suggested a guide dog, with Olivia Poff once again as the on-air puppy raiser. And, as a guide dog mobility instructor, she would be able to incorporate guide dog training with puppy raising from an early age, thereby giving viewers an insight into how a puppy becomes a guide dog.

NBC loved the idea.

In late February, after the TODAY hosts returned from the Winter Games in Pyeongchang, Korea, a yellow Labrador Retriever wearing a bright orange bandana came bounding out from off-camera and headed toward Poff and the TODAY anchors. As he made his way across the studio, the floor was suddenly crowded with puppies, much to the surprise of the TODAY hosts.

We had decided to go big. In addition to the puppy on TODAY, we placed puppies with local NBC stations in Baltimore, Atlanta, Boston, and Los Angeles so viewers in those regions would be able to follow their own puppy with a purpose.

We carefully evaluated several litters to determine who would be the right fit for this high-profile job. Not only did the pups have to be the right age, they needed to have the right temperament and intelligence to become guide and service dogs. All the puppies with a purpose are from the same litter.

After a busy day of media appearances, the four local NBC puppies headed to their new homes with their new puppy raisers, and the TODAY puppy returned home with Poff.

Viewers were asked to choose names for the pups, and by the end of the week, they had spoken: Sunny is the TODAY puppy in New York; Izzy calls Atlanta home; Camden will grow up in Baltimore; Brady in Boston, and Zuma, Los Angeles. Izzy will follow a guide dog curriculum, just like Sunny, while Brady, Camden, and Zuma will grow up to become service dogs.

During the pups’ first few months, the most important aspect of their lives will be their exposure to many different sights and sounds and smells of their hometowns. They’ll get all of that in spades with their weekly appearances on their local NBC stations.

When it’s time, the puppies will continue their formal training at the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs to be placed with individuals with disabilities. Watch TODAY live every day from 7 to 9 a.m. to catch Sunny, the puppy with a purpose, and be sure to follow his Instagram @TODAYPuppy. You can also follow the four local NBC puppies on their own Instagram pages, and be sure to check out their regular “pupdates” at TODAY.GuideDog.org and NBC.VetDogs.org.

Follow the adventures of all our puppies on Instagram:
Sunny, @GuideDogFoundation
Izzy, @11AlivePuppy
Camden, @WBALtvPuppy
Brady, @NBC10BostonPuppy
Zuma, @NBCLAPuppy

Sunny and Olivia (center), with the local NBC puppies (from left to right): Lauren and Izzy, Atlanta; Hallie and Zuma (Zuma is being raised by Sara in Los Angeles); Deana and Camden, Baltimore; Hannah and Brady, Boston.

It’s Always Sunny at the Guide Dog Foundation (continued from cover)
In March 2018, John Miller joined the Guide Dog Foundation as the new president and chief executive officer. He succeeds Wells B. Jones.

When Jones arrived at the Foundation in 1989, he instituted changes that would, over the next three decades, remake the organization. Today, there are three times the employees, providing nearly three times as many dogs; the campus has grown to 10 acres, with more modern facilities to support our operations; and there has been an exponential growth in the volunteers who assist in our programs.

Miller brings experienced leadership in national nonprofits and fundraising, and has been tasked with creating growth and sustainability to continue to advance the dual missions of the Guide Dog Foundation and its sister nonprofit, America’s VetDogs.

According to Don Dea, who serves as the chair of the boards of directors, “John has embraced the mission and values that have been the core of the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs, and we’re thrilled to have him join our team. We are very confident he has the leadership to drive both organizations’ success in the next chapter.”

Previously, Miller served as national president and CEO of the Tourette Association of America, where he increased revenue and implemented a research program that partnered TAA with the top medical institutions around the country.

Prior to TAA, Miller was the CEO of the American Red Cross on Long Island during one of the most important periods in the organization’s 100-year history. He directed the mergers of three independent chapters into one stronger organization and oversaw local responses to high-impact national events including Hurricane Irene and Superstorm Sandy, two of the largest disasters in recent Long Island history.

Miller has been recognized for his strong leadership and has been acknowledged as one of the most influential and brightest businessmen on Long Island. Long Island Business News honored him as an Outstanding CEO in 2014 and one of the top “40 Under 40” executives in 2013.

Miller attended Hofstra University Frank G. Zarb School of Business where he earned his BBA and MBA. He is certified as a Senior Professional in Human Resources® by HR Certification Institute®.

“I am honored to work with the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs, and the entire team at this exciting time,” he says. “I look forward to creating even more dynamic and vibrant opportunities that improve the lives of people with disabilities.”

During his first two weeks, Miller met with the staff, toured the campus, observed guide and service dog training, and had to deal with the final nor’easters of the 2017-18 winter season.
Guide Dogs Changing Lives (continued from page 3)

Samantha Ambrico (continued)

...alternate methods to accommodate her special needs.

It was Ambrico’s love of dance and her passion for advocating for people with disabilities that set this determined young woman on her career path. She attended Eastern University in Pennsylvania, where she majored in dance and psychology. She discovered the dance department was prepared to help her develop the tools she needed to succeed.

Ambrico’s goal is to become a dance movement therapist and open her own practice to help young people with physical disabilities. (Dance movement therapy is the use of movement and dance to help individuals with their intellectual, emotional, and motor skills.)

When Ambrico graduated college, Laurel once again walked across the commencement stage with her. Today, Ambrico is a disability and inclusion consultant for a school district and teaches dance to children with Down syndrome.

She recently got married ... and Laurel once again accompanied her and her new husband down the aisle.<br>

Matthew Lipsey (continued)

...went white water rafting down the Colorado River. He was also an active member of the B’nai Brith Youth Organization.

Although he had friends who had guide dogs, he wasn’t sure what impact one would make on his life. “I have a few friends who have dogs through [the Guide Dog Foundation], and they’ve had nothing but great things to say about their training experience and their work with their dogs.”

He applied and was invited to attend guide dog class in August 2017.

Barely a week into training with his dog, he reported, “I’m moving a lot more briskly, and I’m keeping my head up, and I’m looking more confident. I feel more confident too.”

As a student at the University of Maryland, majoring in math and economics, Lipsey says big crowds had made him uncomfortable, afraid that he was going to bump into someone he couldn’t see, but with his guide dog, “things completely changed. He seamlessly weaves in and out of people.”

When he’s not number crunching, you can find Lipsey climbing the walls – rock walls, that is. People don’t expect him to be as good at it as he is. “I just kind of climb the wall like a spider,” he laughs.

And waiting patiently for him is be his guide dog. “He has become my best friend. I couldn’t ask for a better ‘partner in crime.’”