A workplace accident changed the course of Devin Fernandez's life – even if it took more than a decade.

Fernandez came from a strict family in the Bronx, New York, but still found ways of getting into trouble, so when he was 13, the family moved to Long Island.

“I didn’t have any plans after high school,” he recalls, “and kind of floundered, bouncing back and forth through colleges.” In time, he settled down and trained to become an electrician at DeVry Institute (now DeVry University) in Arizona. Shortly after his return from Arizona, he and his high school sweetheart got married.

While working on a job modifying an electrical box, he slipped into the box, which short-circuited and exploded. His face and arms were severely burned, and he spent two weeks in a burn unit, including four days in a medically induced coma. He was blinded temporarily and had to endure skin grafts to his face, arms, and hands. For the next two years, he wore special forearm sleeves and burn gloves.

Eventually, Fernandez returned to work. He also started his own security company, installing and maintaining security systems such as burglar alarms and security cameras.

A gradual progression

Fernandez first began to notice changes in his vision in 2000, more than 10 years after the accident. “It was very slight,” he says. “I started having some issues with bright light.” For instance, it would take a while for his eyes to adjust to the difference in lighting from outside to inside.

From then on, his vision just kept deteriorating. “My night vision went first,” he says. “Then my depth perception got bad, then I couldn’t read text or see pictures.”

When he first started having vision problems, Fernandez went to see his doctor,
Just as we started to count our blessings for a relatively mild winter with few snowstorms, a mid-March nor’easter gave a quick reminder that the season hadn’t quite finished with us. Long Island was spared the worst of the storm, but we still experienced colder-than-normal temperatures, snow, and freezing rain.

Although the Foundation officially closed for the day (to ensure the safety of our team), there’s no such thing as a day off where those in our care are concerned, whether students or dogs or puppies. There was no guide or service dog class in session at the time, but I am confident our staff would have made sure our students were looked after and found ways to continue training (just as they have when we’ve faced similar situations).

Some of our kennel care associates stayed overnight in the student residence to avoid potentially hazardous roads in the morning, and our house staff pitched in to shovel kennel runs and provide back-up to make sure the dogs were fed and cared for.

This is a small example of the commitment of our Guide Dog Foundation family, no matter which department they work in. It is a commitment that goes beyond our employees and extends to our volunteers and donors and other supporters. I’m proud to be part of an organization with such dedicated individuals.

We shivered through the last few weeks of the month, even as the calendar indicated the arrival of spring. But no matter the temperature, spring brings with it rebirth and renewed hope, and for many of our students, a guide or service dog represents the first steps on the path to rebirth and renewed hope, and the opportunity to live without boundaries.

In this issue of The Guideway, you’ll learn about some of the paths that mark the journey we undertake to fulfill our mission: the assessment tools we use to help puppies and puppy raisers increase their chances for success; a profile of volunteer Jeff Fernandez, whose health and mobility issues after retirement set him on a new path of helping others; and graduate Devin Fernandez (no relation to Jeff), whose vision loss gave him a new purpose and mission in his life.

It is thanks to you that we are able to traverse these paths. For that we are grateful.

Wells B. Jones, FASAE, CAE, CFRE
Chief Executive Officer

Welcome Our New Teams

Class of November 2016
Class of December 2016
Class of January 2017
Class of February 2017
Jeff Fernandez is an unassuming guy. He is reluctant at first to be profiled—he doesn’t want to be singled out above other volunteers—but eventually he’s persuaded that his story will inspire others.

Fernandez was born and raised on Long Island, New York, and at age 24, went to work for King Kullen, a Long Island-based, family-owned grocery chain, where he was an assistant store manager before shifting “behind the scenes” as assistant director of warehousing and transportation, managing all the trucking and warehousing operations for the entire chain. When King Kullen outsourced these functions, Fernandez became an assistant store manager again.

King Kullen is privately held but gives employees the opportunity to buy stock in the company. From the beginning of his career, Fernandez would invest his yearly bonus, buying stock and watching it accumulate year after year.

After 31 years with the company, retirement began to beckon. Generally, employees chose May to retire, before the annual stock valuation in June. King Kullen had had a very profitable year the year Fernandez turned 55, so he recalls saying to his wife, “Do we want to stick it out? Most people don’t.” She replied: “Let’s roll the dice,” so they waited.

When he got the news that the stock had risen in value by 72 percent, “I went up to the president and said I was retiring,” he laughs. “They made it a pretty easy decision.”

Enjoying the good life

“I was planning a career change after retirement,” Fernandez says, but he didn’t have a clear idea of what that would be. “For the first six months, I didn’t do anything”—“anything” being a relative term.

He’d always enjoyed outdoor sports. “I just like adventure. I didn’t learn to ski until I was 40, but when I ski, I do black and double-black diamonds.” In addition, he’s been white water rafting and even skydiving, plus plenty of hiking.

On one trip, Fernandez and his wife flew into Las Vegas, rented an SUV, and drove through Nevada and Arizona, before they ended up at Zion National Park in Utah. He has visited at least eight national parks, including Haleakalā National Park on Maui.

Health issues

A few years into his retirement, Fernandez developed liver disease. His doctors suspected cancer because his tumor markers were “off the charts.” Suddenly, this active, vital man was struggling with health problems.

He was deemed a candidate for a liver transplant. All candidates are placed on the national waiting list and “scored,” which determines how urgently they need a liver: the higher the score, the more urgent the need. Fernandez’s score was not high; in New York, he would be on the waiting list for years.

However, there are transplant centers throughout the country, each of which has different criteria, so transplant candidates may “list” themselves in other areas. Fernandez also registered with a center in Florida, where his in-laws lived.

In February 2013, six weeks after first meeting with the transplant team in Fort Lauderdale, he received his liver transplant. “I was very fortunate,” he says.

Fernandez was in the hospital for only seven days after his surgery, although he remained in Florida for eight months for follow-up and monitoring.

Once he was on the road to recovery, he had time to deal with other health issues, including arthritis, which was often debilitating and severely affected his mobility. There were times, he recalls, when he had to rely on canes or crutches or scooters to get around—if he could move at all.

While he lived in Florida, a big part of Fernandez’s support system was his dog. “My dog did a lot for me mentally,” he says. Taking care of the dog, “kept the focus off myself.” With the help of a trainer, he taught his dog to do tasks to help mitigate some of the issues he faced.

‘A second shot’

Once he got his health issues under control to a point where they were manageable and he was feeling better, Fernandez felt it was time to do some kind of volunteer work. There were many times when he thought, “I might not make it,” but, he adds, “I got a second shot.”

(continued on page 8)
The Name a Puppy Sponsorship

One of our naming opportunities is our puppy sponsorship program. For a gift of $6,000, which helps defray the expenses during a puppy’s first year, puppy sponsors can choose to name a puppy. To learn more about our puppy sponsorship program, visit GuideDog.org and click on “Ways to Give.”

Anchorage Rotary Club

Did you know that the Guide Dog Foundation has graduates in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, and in Canada and Brazil? Recently, Alaskan grads Bryan Gearry and Kevin Whitley visited the Anchorage Rotary Club, which has supported the Guide Dog Foundation since 2009. The club has sponsored five dogs: two became guide dogs and one is a service dog for a disabled veteran. Bryan (center, red jacket) and Kevin (second from right) with members of the Anchorage Downtown Rotary Club.

Morgan Stanley

To honor three of their colleagues (Pat Van Leer, Aubrey Persuad, and Linda Ryder), employees at Morgan Stanley raised $6,000 to sponsor a puppy they named PAL. Shown left to right: Cindy Persaud (Aubrey’s wife), Morgan employees Donna Evans, Franca Baltas, and (seated) Georgia Skiadas, who will be PAL’s puppy raiser.

We may have been bundled up during the winter in the northeast, but for the Suncoast Puppy Raisers, our puppy raising group based in St. Petersburg, Florida, shorts and flip-flops were the wardrobe of choice during their group outings.

Puppy raisers board the Downtown Looper trolley for a ride around the sights and sounds of downtown St. Petersburg.

After the trolley, the group went to the Saturday morning farmers market. According to Chuck & Debbie Hietala, our area coordinators, the market is busy and crowded, which make for good exposures for the puppies.
During class, a student learns how to get on and off an escalator with his guide dog. How do we make sure the dogs are comfortable with the moving stairs? According to Jackie Audette, our apprentice program manager: “We want the escalators to be a positive experience for dogs in formal training, so we pair them with the dogs’ favorite things – treats, toys, and praise. Initially, the dogs ride with a fellow dog in training to inspire group confidence. Once they feel good about riding, they learn to ride individually. We then polish their entrance, stationary position, and exit so in the future they are able to keep their handler safe.”

Several members of our training department and consumer services office visited the Cleveland Sight Center last year to introduce the “guide dog lifestyle” to young people between the ages of 16 and 21. It was the second visit we had made to the center. After our presentation, we invited members of the program to “test drive” a guide dog. At left, one of our instructors works with a Center client.

One of the places we train locally is the retirement community at Peconic Landing on Long Island. Over the holidays, several of our instructors brought their dogs to train at the facility, and later visited with the residents.

Photos by Rebecca Eden

Training at Peconic Landing on the North Shore.

Everything can be a learning experience for puppies. Adventure boxes provide stimulation and learning experiences as pups learn that their environment is full of things that move and make noise and that these are interesting and fun.

During class, a student learns how to get on and off an escalator with his guide dog. How do we make sure the dogs are comfortable with the moving stairs? According to Jackie Audette, our apprentice program manager: “We want the escalators to be a positive experience for dogs in formal training, so we pair them with the dogs’ favorite things – treats, toys, and praise. Initially, the dogs ride with a fellow dog in training to inspire group confidence. Once they feel good about riding, they learn to ride individually. We then polish their entrance, stationary position, and exit so in the future they are able to keep their handler safe.”
Finding a New Path

(continued from cover)

who told him he had retinitis pigmentosa (RP). As his vision loss progressed, he sought out retinal specialists, and with each visit, “I was able to see the decrease in my vision.”

Although RP is an inherited disorder, Fernandez’s doctors told him his case stemmed from his accident and the scar tissue that had built up in his retinas.

Exploring options – and a guide dog

As his vision deteriorated, a part of Fernandez remained in denial, even as he faced reality. “The hardest part was giving up my independence.”

But he soon discovered that going blind didn’t mean losing independence. His mother helped him discover the services available from the New York State Commission for the Blind. He learned orientation and mobility and other adaptive life skills. “It helped make the transition easier,” he says.

Also on his radar was the use of a guide dog. “It was never not an option.” When he reached the point where the “stick” (what Fernandez calls his white cane) wasn’t enough, he applied to several schools for a guide dog.

Although he wanted a German Shepherd, when Doug Wiggin, an instructor from the Guide Dog Foundation, contacted Fernandez, he explained he had a Shepherd/Collie cross that might fit Fernandez’s needs. (At the time, the Foundation was experimenting with different breeds as guide dogs.)

Under Wiggin’s watchful eye, Fernandez and the dog walked from Fernandez’s house in West Islip, New York, to the dojo where he practices martial arts. The walk went fine, but Fernandez still wanted to “think about it.”

The more he did, however, the more he realized: “This dog is presented to me now. Who knows what comes up the pike. Let me take her.”

Fernandez trained with Skittles on campus in 2011. At the time most guide dog classes at the Foundation were four weeks, although we offered a “combo” option – students trained two weeks on campus and one week in their home community. Instructors determined this option would work best for Fernandez.

“When I came to class, it was a little emotional,” he recalls, prompted by his realization: “I had gotten to the point where I needed a service animal.” But once he started to interact with his fellow students, “I felt enlightened.” Other members of his class had had guide dogs previously, so he learned how they dealt with life with a guide dog.

“It was a great experience to be there,” he says.

It took almost a year for Fernandez and his guide dog to form a really strong bond, but he was impressed by her intelligence from the start.

The two make frequent trips to Manhattan, traveling by train and subway. “My vision has gotten to the point where I have to fully trust her,” he says. “She does the right thing. I don’t even question it. I take her almost everywhere I go. She has been a tremendous gift.”

A new path

Fernandez has practiced martial arts for many years and has achieved his nidan, which is a second-degree black belt, in ninpo ninjutsu, an ancient traditional Japanese martial art. After he lost his vision, he began looking for fitness programs that were geared specifically for those with vision loss. Not finding what he needed on Long Island, he and his sister set out to create one. “Third Eye Insight was started to bring martial arts and fitness to people who are blind or visually impaired,” he says.

On a recent Saturday, the lobby of a dojo in West Islip is crowded and noisy with excited kids and their parents, and other patient adults waiting for Fernandez, their sensei (“teacher”). Like Fernandez, the students are blind or visually impaired.

He is pulling double-duty today. He starts first with a small class of adults, putting the students through their warm-up exercises with soft, slow movements before turning the class over to a colleague so he can focus on the group of six young people who were waiting in the lobby. Assisting him are members of the Delta Gamma sorority from Adelphi University.

Fernandez instructs them on how to bow properly when entering or leaving a room and explains that he is also blind. He is engaging and patient as he explains the different poses they will learn. It’s obvious throughout the session that they’re having fun. As they finish the class, there are smiles all around as they bow in thanks.

Fernandez attributes his positive attitude to his strong spiritual beliefs. “I don’t worry about what I don’t have control of,” he says. “I go forward with what I can do.”

6
The first year of a puppy’s life is filled with adventure, learning, and fun as it prepares for a future career as a guide or service dog. Our puppy raisers are challenged with setting a puppy on this journey.

To help ensure their success, we have developed a variety of tools that allow us to constantly assess the pups from the time they are 8 weeks old, continuing through their training as future assistance dogs.

These tools allow us to make adjustments and corrections when needed – all with the goal to create a successful working dog.

At 2 months of age, a puppy is evaluated and set on one of two paths: to be placed with a full-time puppy raiser on the guide dog track or into one of our prison programs to train to become a service dog. For the next year or so, the puppy will be exposed to many new and exciting situations and experiences.

Puppy raisers prepare monthly reports, which our puppy advisors use to determine a pup’s progress. They then make suggestions or corrections for the puppy raiser to help improve the puppy’s chances of becoming a guide or service dog.

Dogs, like people, mature and learn at different rates, so at 12 months of age, we perform the YODA (“Year Old Dog Assessment”). We use this test to ensure that dogs will be called in for formal training at the right age, with the right skills, and with the proper level of maturity. The pup will be assessed in three main areas: basic skills, impulse control, and obedience. By using the YODA, we can determine if the dog is ready to move to the next phase in its training.

The puppy raiser will have the pup walk on different surfaces, walk near traffic, and interact with different people. Together they will practice going through doors, and up and down stairs. Staff from the puppy department monitors the pup throughout. The test results allow us to determine if the pup is ready for more challenging exercises.

If the puppy doesn’t meet its objectives, based on the criteria we set, the puppy advisor will develop a plan the raiser can follow to help them both succeed. In a month, the puppy will be retested.

At 15 months, a puppy undergoes a new evaluation, this time focusing on impulse control and temperament. The puppy must be comfortable in many different scenarios and resist the temptations and distractions present in its environment at any given time.

If it doesn’t meet its objectives this time, we review the pup’s history and overall performance over the past several months. This information will help us determine if the pup will overcome these issues once it starts working with a guide dog trainer. If so, the pup will advance. If not, we will consider a career change. A career-changed dog may go on to work with law enforcement agencies or be offered to another program or become a family pet with its puppy raiser.

Once it reaches the 15-month-old mark, a puppy can be recalled for formal training. Puppy raisers continue to work with the dog until they are notified that it’s time for the pup to return to the Foundation, usually within three months.

This is a sad time for puppy raisers, but also a joyful one. They have to say good-bye to the pup who has become a part of their family, but they’re armed with the knowledge that it’s ready to take the next step and train to become a guide or service dog.

The Puppy Program Manager Hallie Wells (left) evaluates a puppy during the YODA.
Transplanted to a New Purpose in Life

(continued from page 3)

The restrictions he had experienced gave him an empathy for others with mobility issues, and his work with his own dog and general love for canines pointed him in the direction of assistance dogs.

“I always knew about the Guide Dog Foundation,” he says, so he headed to Smithtown. A serendipitous meeting with the staff member who processed new volunteer applications turned into a tour of the campus and an explanation of the different opportunities available.

Within a week, he was a hospitality volunteer, serving meals to students on class, and then working the reception desk on his own.

In the two years since he first walked through the door, Fernandez has become one of the Foundation’s most reliable volunteers. In addition to hospitality and reception, he’s helped out in the office, driven for the taxi team, assisted the puppy department as a “puppy tester” and breeder caretaker, and become a member of the speakers bureau. He even does orientation for new volunteers – the list goes on and on. The only thing he hasn’t done yet is be a puppy raiser.

As one of the volunteer drivers, Fernandez once transported 21 dogs by himself from New York to Delaware and Maryland for the prison puppy program. “I used to enjoy the longer trips [out of state],” he says. “I still do some local trips if it fits into my schedule.”

He’s hard-pressed to pick a favorite volunteer activity, but, “I probably like speaking the most.” It’s a chance to go out and spread the word about the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs, about guide and service dogs and how they help people.

“I get so much out of it myself,” he says. “You feel good about yourself – that you’re doing something to help someone.”

In addition to his volunteer work, Fernandez is a part-time driver for a local funeral home. It was something he started doing during the “six months of being bored.”

But his heart belongs to the Guide Dog Foundation and America’s VetDogs. “I will turn down the paying job to keep my volunteer commitment. I’d rather be doing this.” 🐶