

## Linking with Queeny

Things had changed. I was concerned that my sight had degenerated rather dramatically since my departure for a Queensland holiday. On arrival, and during the week I visited Pedro, I needed much more guidance than my cane offered. In a strange environment, I had lost confidence in my mobility and required an arm for support and guidance.

On returning home, my local surroundings were no longer so familiar. I began searching for reasons. Perhaps the three hour flight or cabin pressure had an affect on my vision? I contacted my ophthalmologist seeking answers. I was informed that such flights were not documented to cause deterioration of sight in persons coping with retinitis pigmentosa. The most probable explanation was I had experienced another setback with diminishing vision.

After 12 years of life depending on a long white cane, I decided to contact Guide Dogs Victoria and get advice on applying for a guide dog. I have friends who use guide dogs, and although I have a great love and understanding of animals, I always felt I was not ready for the commitment to seek one myself.

“I would know when the time was right”, I responded to those who suggested the move over several years. I had been very confident with cane use, but now doubts had permeated my thinking and well being.

On September 2, 2008, I was visited by representatives of Guide Dogs Victoria, (GDV), along with a working dog called Edie. I listened to a 45 minutes presentation before I was offered the opportunity to walk with Edie, (who had lay at my feet throughout the discussions with his head on my right foot). It felt good that Edie was so relaxed with me. I warmed to sharing with a dog again.

Out in the street, following instruction in harness and guide dog mobility, we moved forward. My first reaction was, “Wow, I didn’t think a guide dog would walk so fast”. This had a positive feel, as I harboured concerns I would have to slow down my pace to accommodate a guide dog. It felt great, but I knew I had lots to learn. “Why did Edie swerve? Had he spotted some food? How would I know distraction from avoidance of obstacles?”

I was reassured this would come steadily with experience. I was definitely starting to think, 'the time was right'. After a 15 minutes walk with Edie, I was left with a DVD and brochures to show family. I visited my sister and brother-in-law still tossing the variables around my head. They were excited by my experience and after viewing the DVD, encouraged me to take the next step and apply for a guide dog.

On request, I supplied GDV with a medical report and six weeks later was visited by a trainer and assistant, for a detailed assessment. I was made feel very comfortable to make my own decisions. I was relaxed by the professionalism and detail given to making a perfect match in a guide dog. I was videoed walking with my cane to further assist with a suitable selection.

On December 12, I received a call from GDV to inform me an introduction to Queeny and my proposed trainer, Aaron, had been arranged. I was so excited to be nearing the final hurdle.

Aaron picked me up after a computer class at Vision Australia, and took me to the GDV complex in Kew. We drove up to the kennel facility, where the air was filled with yapping dogs. I felt at home. I had made the right decision. When Aaron returned he handed me a lead and said, "This is Queeny, introduce yourself and I will check her out for a home visit".

My first reaction was, she's smaller than I anticipated, but with a wagging tail and the offer of a paw to shake, I was smitten. "She likes me", and gave me friendly licks to show her appreciation. I could not have been happier with the match. Aaron drove us home to see how Queeny responded to my environment. She was keen to investigate and gave us signs of excited approval.

Aaron explained I would begin training at GDV on January 19. A four week live in course along with six other new guide dog clients. It was going to be a long five weeks, waiting for the course to commence.

I spent those weeks in high spirits. Visualizing the rainbows we would ride and the smiles we would share.

Queeny was going to be my best mate for years to come.