**Guide Dog Access Awareness Month – Meet Blair**

**Transcript**

**Ryan**: Hi, again. My name is Ryan Hooey. To mark Guide Dog Access Awareness Month, I got the opportunity to speak with Guide Dog Handler, Blair. He has some things that he wants employers to know about Guide Dog rights in the workplace. Listen to their interview here.

**Blair:** Hi, my name is Blair Young.

**Ryan**: Blair, can you describe what your life was like before you had a Guide Dog?

**Blair:** I never really felt comfortable using a white cane. Although, it really helped me in getting from point A to point B, the problem I found was that

it would detect an object, but it would not stop me from walking into that object. And as my vision progressed, in the area of losing more I just found that I wasn't getting out as much and not doing as much, 'cause I didn't want to have to deal with all the situations that I personally ran into with using a white cane.Once CNIB got involved in the Guide Dog Program, I made the decision that I was going to apply for a dog. Based on the fact that I had worked for CNIB for twenty-eight years. So, I kind of knew what CNIB was all about, and what I would be getting.

**Ryan:** That's perfect.And so, you kind of touch on this a bit. But, why did you apply for a Guide Dog then?

**Blair:** Well, my vision got to the point where I was constantly having

to depend on somebody else. Even though I had a white cane, I still wouldn't venture too far. I found myself always looking down all the time. And whenever we would travel somewhere, I really was missing a lot, and my independence was not increasing. I felt more like it was decreasing for me. So, that's when I made the decision that it's time for me to start researching a Guide Dog. So, I started watching different videos, talking to different groups. Finding out what people in those experiences were with their Guide Dog. And I thought, "I really think this is going to be good for me." So, I made that decision to apply.

**Ryan:** And what is kind of one thing that you wish people knew about Guide Dogs?

**Blair:** In the short time that I've had Kelly, the one thing that really

bothers me, I guess a lot, is the fact that people feel that they can just come up and talk to her and pet her, and such. And when she's working,

it's very distracting. I find it difficult to find the proper soft words, so that you don't come across as an angry person. But, at the same time, sometimes you have to be a little stern in your voice to get your point across. I think there's a lot of education that has to be had, in order to get people to start thinking that when you see a Guide Dog, you don't bother them. You can talk to me if you want, but you don't bother with the dog.

**Ryan:** As a Guide Dog Handler, what barriers have you faced?

**Blair:** As a Guide Dog Handler I face barriers of going into different restaurants. People questioning whether my guide dog, Kelly, is a real Guide Dog. Because it doesn't say "Service" on her harness. It just says "CNIB Guide Dog." But on the whole, I think at least in Saint John here, if people ask me for identification in restaurants and places like that, I will show them that. I had a few incidents at Costco, which were resolved, and now I don't have any problems there whatsoever. And again, it was the question of, "Do you have a Service Dog?" And I would say, "I have a Guide Dog." And they would say, but it's not a Service Dog. And then, you have to go into this big explanation, and I don't feel I should have to do that to get into a store.

**Ryan:** How has CNIB provide you with some advocacy skills to overcome these barriers?

**Blair:** Well, CNIB has a great staff on board in the area of advocacy, and of course other departments as well. But anytime we have an issue, I will send off an email or a text, and their reply is rather quick with either links as to where I can get information and provide it to the situation in question, or they will speak to me and give me advice as to what they think I should do next. Should I pursue it? Should I not? That sort of thing. So the support for that part, as well as the other Guide Dog Program information is very good.

**Ryan:** What would you tell employers about Guide Dogs, or what did you wish employers knew about Guide Dogs?

**Blair:** I wish they knew that an employee having a Guide Dog is no different than an employee in a wheelchair, or an employee using a cane, or other kind of mobility device. You know, my dog will be situated in a place during work. We take them out to relieve and exercise throughout the day when I'm allowed to get out at lunchtime and such. And that the dog will not be roaming all over the place, and that they're not jumping and barking and yelling. You know not yelling, but barking at people and disturbing the environment. And that the employees themselves when the dog is in harness, would just ignore the dog and leave them alone. If they want to talk to me, that's fine. But as far as the dog goes, it's like he's not there. I would just like to reassure the employer that it's not gonna make any difference whatsoever in the quality or quantity of work, or the environment in which we're working in, having a Guide Dog there.

**Ryan:** How has your life changed since being partnered with a Guide Dog?

**Blair:** Well, my life has changed dramatically. I now feel like I have the freedom and confidence to go out and do all the things I'd like to do. Kelly and I are out every day on the buses. We are in different parts of the city, shopping malls. We go everywhere and do everything. Prior to that, to having her, I never did a lot of those things, because I was always afraid and not confident in my mobility, and using a white cane. But with her, I have no question about going anywhere.

**Ryan:** Special thank you to Kelly and Blair for giving us your time during Guide Dog Awareness Month. Blair, if you could give Kelly a pat on the head from all of us here at CNIB, and thank you so much for your time, and answering the questions. My name is Ryan Hooey, Program Lead for Come to Work at CNIB in Ontario West. Thanks for listening.

**Blair:** Thank you.