



# Walking Eyes

In this first instalment of our working dogs series, meet Alvin Ng, a visually-impaired person who is waiting to welcome his first guide dog. **BY JACLYN GUNA**

**FOR** dog lovers, having a dog brings a great number of benefits, like loyal companionship, endless affection, fewer health problems and a whole lot of fun. But for Alvin Ng, owning a dog will bring much more.

Alvin Ng is a plucky 44-year-old man. He lost his eyesight when he was 31 years old due to a tragic bout of high fever and multiple organ failures caused by another disease that attacked his immune system previously. As a result of his blindness, he lost his job as an IT professional.

Although he could not see anymore, Alvin was determined to face life's new trials for him. About six months after losing his eyesight, he attended white cane training organised by the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH) to learn how to use a cane to help him move around. He wanted to be less reliant on family members and friends who were always helpful to him, to walk about on his own. But despite his own efforts, Alvin found using a cane to feel his way around was far from ideal.

Five years ago, Alvin met Kua Cheng Hock and his guide dog, Kendra, at the SAVH. Cheng Hock is Singapore's first guide dog owner. Little did Alvin know that a guide dog could be a reliable yet protective companion for a visually handicapped person like him; unfortunately, Alvin feared dogs.

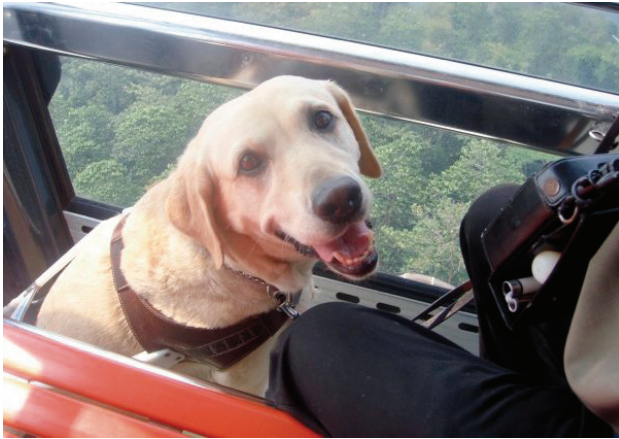
But Kendra was different – Alvin could sense Kendra's friendliness and ability to care and to guide her owner around. After that meeting, Alvin completely changed his view about dogs. He liked Kendra so much that he wanted a guide dog for himself. He called Cheng Hock a few days later to ask if he could also own one.

## HELP FROM ABROAD

Cheng Hock had received Kendra from the US-based organisation called Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. (GDB Inc.). As a charitable organisation, the GDB's mission is to provide "enhanced mobility to qualified individuals through partnership



Cheng Hock and his guide dog, Kendra.



with dogs whose unique skills are developed and nurtured by dedicated volunteers and a team of professional staff." Part of the GDB's mission is to pass on its expertise in training guide dogs to other countries where there is such interest. The GDB currently works with the Guide Dogs Association for the Blind (GDAB), which operates in Singapore, to send over trained guide dogs to benefit local visually impaired people.

In March 2006, two representatives from GDB Inc. came to Singapore to interview and evaluate four visually impaired people – including Alvin – on their eligibility to own guide dogs. That was to ensure that the prospective guide dog owners would have the right aptitude and abilities. For example, although the dog can help its owner walk safely and quickly, the owner needs to know how to navigate independently, so that he can give commands to the dog on which route to take.

Though Alvin got through the interview successfully, he lacked independence and was not confident to move around on his own with just his white cane. In order to qualify for a guide dog, he had to go through Orientation and Mobility training to learn how to move around independently with his cane.

Alvin was undeterred. He wanted a guide dog, so he was prepared to go for training. Early this year, his chance came. He enrolled for the training course taught by Jamie Adams, an Orientation and Mobility instructor hired by the GDAB, from January to June 2010. Jamie holds a Master's degree from the San Francisco State University in Orientation and Mobility.

"Cane travelling is tactile, meaning a cane traveller can use his or her cane to 'feel' out obstacles in their path," explained Jamie. "Though canes can be used to detect obstacles like drains, stairs, or bumps, they are pretty much useless for detecting overhead obstacles like tree branches or pipes. A guide dog is trained to detect all kinds of obstacles and steer his or her owner out of harm's way."





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Apart from being their owners' eyes, guide dogs are also trained in intelligent disobedience. For example, if the owner commands his guide dog to cross a busy road, the guide dog will not obey if the road is not cleared, despite its owner's insistence. This protective sense that the dog has for its owner will only be instilled when there is an emotional bond between owner and dog.

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In early June 2010, the four candidates, including Alvin, were evaluated once more by a Guide Dog Instructor for their aptness to travel independently (video-taped), knowledge of important routes and their ability to provide a suitable home for the guide dogs.

By late June, the GDAB received news from GDB Inc. that Alvin and the three other candidates passed this assessment. Alvin and another candidate will be heading to the United States in November this year whilst the other two will go during the first quarter of 2011 for a two-week programme to be paired up with suitable guide dogs. After a suitable dog is paired up with the candidate, they will learn how to work together as a “Guide Dog Team”, where they will literally be spending all their time together building trust and bonding.

Alvin has been waiting to get his guide dog for four years: “It will be my first time travelling alone since I have lost my eyesight and there will be new challenges to face once I receive my guide dog.” Despite feeling a little apprehensive about his trip, Alvin no doubt looks forward to the day when he can have a guide dog to lead a better life.

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Coming up in Issue 29: Alvin meets his guide dog.

## ABOUT GUIDE DOGS

Labradors and Golden Retrievers are the most suitable breeds to be trained as guide dogs. These breeds are known for their intelligence, patience, loyalty and dedication. They are bred in special “guide dog” training schools, which are usually non-profit organisations.

When the dogs are eight weeks old, they are given to volunteers known as “Puppy Raisers” who will provide them loving homes until they are 13 to 18 months old, when they are ready to go back to the training school. Before then, Puppy Raisers will teach their puppies basic obedience, socialisation and good indoor manners. The puppies will be exposed to as many social situations as possible so that they will be confident enough to deal with stressful situations in the future.

The puppies will also learn how to walk on a leash and how to relieve themselves on command. This is especially important, as it can be extremely distracting for a visually impaired person if his or her guide dog stops to relieve itself anytime or anywhere it wants.

When the puppies return to the school, trainers will assess their suitability to be guide dogs. They will look out for qualities like intelligence, concentration skills, memory and willingness to learn. The potential guide dog must not show any aggressive or nervous behaviours. If they pass the evaluation, the dogs will undergo intensive guide dog training to prepare them for their new owners.

**If you are interested to know more about the life of a guide dog, we strongly recommend you watch the movie “Quill” which is easily available in most DVD stores.**