

News

It has been eight years since the first guide dog arrived in Singapore to help her blind handler but the dogs are still turned away at some outlets.
JUDITH TAN spent a day with Ms Cassandra Chiu and her dog Esme to test the level of acceptance.



STOP: (Left) A Certis Cisco officer at the Novena MRT station stopped Ms Cassandra Chiu from entering with Esme, saying pet dogs are not allowed.

(Right) An employee at Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen in Square 2 also stops Ms Chiu and Esme from entering.

(Below) Public transport, including its bus operators, are accepting of blind handlers and their guide dogs.

TNP PICTURES: CHOO CHWEE HUA



GUIDE DOGS not welcome



MANY basically don't care that guide dogs are allowed in public places here, or do they?

"If it was not a regular place within my normal routine that I was going to, there would be a 50-50 chance – sometimes even a 70-30 chance – that we would be rejected," psychotherapist Cassandra Chiu, 34, said.

She was talking about gaining entry into malls, shops and even eateries with her guide dog Esme, a Labrador.

The truth is that Esme has been a "lifesaver" in more ways than one for Ms Chiu, who suffers from Stargardt disease, a genetic macular degeneration that causes progressive vision loss.

"Apart from helping me get around and overcome obstacles along the way, Esme had also stood in my way twice and saved my life. Otherwise I would have been knocked down by a car. A white cane wouldn't have helped me in such situations," she said.

Leaving Tanglin Shopping Centre, where her counselling practice The Safe Harbour is located, at about noon last Friday, Ms Chiu decided to make her way to her doctor's clinic at Liat Towers, our first stop, to pay her bill.

With Esme by her side, Ms Chiu walked decisively

and quickly, making her way as confidently as a sighted person.

"I call Esme my little Ferrari. She trots rather quickly by my side. I sometimes don't know who is keeping up with whom," she said, laughing.

The Labrador manoeuvred them safely to their destination, saving Ms Chiu from walking right into construction hoardings or other pedestrians along the way.

The first query

While one security guard at the lobby of Liat Towers kindly indicated to Ms Chiu which lift was available, another, on her way down, told her that no pet dogs were allowed in the building.

When informed that Esme was not a pet but her seeing-eye dog, the guard simply kept quiet and did not protest further.

The New Paper team then decided to test the waters at Velocity, a mall located at Novena where the duo had never been.

As they made their way to the bus stop in front of Royal Plaza on Scotts, they did not encounter any problems, not even when they took a shortcut through Japanese departmental store Isetan Scotts.

"The sales staff here know us because I often drop in to shop on my way home from work. It is a

regular place within my normal routine," Ms Chiu said.

Although commuters waiting at the bus stop stared at them, no one said anything and the SMRT bus service 167 arrived rather quickly. Ms Chiu and Esme boarded the bus without any fuss from driver or passengers.

"Public transport was once a major problem but the situation has improved. I guess the operators had briefed their staff to create awareness among them," she said, adding that some of the hospitals she went to also allowed Esme entry.

Alighting at the stop in front of Revenue House along Newton Road, the team decided to test a government office and have Ms Chiu ask for directions to the restroom.

Kudos to the information counter and the security guards for acting nonchalantly about a guide dog in the building.

The first rejection

After taking several turns at the ground floor of Velocity and seeing that many of the patrons at the eateries there were Malay families, Ms Chiu and the team decided to move on to Square 2 next door to stop for lunch.

"Although Muis (the Islamic Religious Council of

Singapore) had said that halal-certified places can allow guide dogs on their premises, we are after all living in a multiracial, multicultural community. So I try not to enter places where Muslim families would feel uncomfortable," Ms Chiu said.

It was at fast-food chain Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen in Square 2 that the duo faced their first rejection. Waiting to enter the restaurant, an employee approached her and stopped her from entering, saying that pet dogs are not allowed inside.

"She is not a pet dog. She is a guide dog. I'm blind, she helps me see," Ms Chiu explained.

She even pulled out the identity card issued by the Ministry of Social and Family Development as proof, but the young man could not make the decision and deferred to his manager before walking away without a word, leaving Ms Chiu and Esme standing at the entrance for the next 10 minutes.

Assuming it was okay, the duo joined the line for food orders. Patrons in the line and at the tables did not protest.

Nurse Nora Simah Anuar, 30, who was standing directly behind Ms Chiu in the line, said she did not see the fuss about allowing the guide dog into the restaurant. "It is, after all, a working dog. It is there to provide assistance to the lady. I may be afraid of big dogs and culturally not allowed to pet them, I am still okay with it being here. Besides, it is so well-behaved," she told TNP.

Ms Chiu managed to buy her lunch and ate at Popeyes without further fussing from any of its employees.

On the way back to her office, she was once again stopped, this time by a security officer after managing to get through the gantry at the Novena MRT station. She was told that pet dogs were not allowed into the MRT station and once again she patiently explained that Esme is a guide dog and showed her Government-issued identity card.

Not convinced, the guard consulted the station manager on duty and when that informed the dog was allowed, returned to say: "You may go ahead" without apologising.

Upon reaching Tanglin Shopping Centre, Ms Chiu and Esme took their leave.

Ms Chiu's said: "I hope this exercise would be useful and help create awareness among the people and businesses in Singapore."

5 things you didn't know about guide dogs

- 1 They are trained to walk in a straight line, unless told to turn a corner or when there is an obstacle in the way. In that case, they will walk around the obstacle and resume their regular trek.
- 2 They are taught to stop before stepping off a curb. They will wait for the command to cross or turn and will not step off the curb until a choice is made or a command given.
- 3 If you happen to be walking with the visually handicapped person and the dog, do not walk to the dog's left. Instead, walk to the right of the person. Also, never walk directly in front of the guide dog as that would block its vision.
- 4 It is fine to play with the guide dog when it is not "on duty". Do not roughhouse or tease it. The dog can be petted, but not on the head as some dogs are taught to obey a command that is signalled by a pat on the head.
- 5 Guide dogs do not go to the toilet when they are working and when the harness is on. They are usually taught to go on specific surfaces, such as grass.

The Haagen-Dazs incident

PSYCHOTHERAPIST Cassandra Chiu, 34, and her guide dog Esme found themselves in the news last week.

Her Facebook post about how she was treated last Sunday at the Holland Village Haagen-Dazs outlet went viral.

Despite presenting the manager with a photo identity card supported by the Ministry of Social and Family Development to allow guide dogs into public places, cafe staff repeatedly told her no pets were allowed, even though she explained that Esme was not a pet but a working dog to assist the blind. They and a group of friends eventually left.

Responding to questions by The New Paper, Haagen-Dazs managing director for South-east Asia and Asia Markets Wuthichai Ratanasumwongs said staff at the outlet initially "did not realise it was a guide dog" and steered the party "to the seating area outside instead of allowing them inside".

"That was a mistake, and we are very sorry that happened. We are taking immediate steps to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said.

While advocates of the disabled say allowing guide dogs into establishments should be a right, not a privilege, owners of establishments have the right to turn them away.

Lawyers contacted said it was restaurant owners' prerogative not to welcome blind persons with guide dogs.

This is unlike in countries such as the United States, Australia or Japan, where rejecting a blind person with a guide dog can be seen as discrimination and anyone who treats a person with a guide dog differently can be subject to prosecution.