

Sheppard's Bush goes to the dogs with the Lions this Saturday



By Brock Weir

Boise liked nothing better than to doze all day on his oversized pillow, but when Chris Schiafone needed him, he was always ready to shake it off, spring into action, and give his human the independence so many of us take for granted.

Over a decade since Chris, now 33, and Boise formed their close bond, the human now relies on the slightly more rambunctious Romaine to be his eyes.

Chris was born with a genetic visual impairment. Deteriorating over the years, he lost his sight completely just over a decade ago and had to learn fast how to get around with a white cane. Taking on the challenge of working and forging that bond with a guide dog, took some convincing, but once he got there he realised it truly gave him his independence back.

Now he's working to help others living in visual impairment experience that same joy.

Dog lovers ? and even just those looking to have a good stroll ? are invited to come out to Sheppard's Bush this Saturday for the Lions Foundation of Canada's Purina Walk for Dog Guides, which aims to raise money to train guide dogs for people with a variety of challenges, ranging from blindness to autism.

Each guide dog costs \$25,000 to raise and train, but the Lions Foundation, which receives no government funding, provides them at no cost to qualified individuals.

The Purina Walk for Dog Guides takes place in more than 200 communities and after participating in one recent walk in Guelph, Mr. Schiafone, who is Second Vice-President of the Lions Club of Aurora, was determined to spearhead Aurora's.

Registration opens to everyone in the community at 9 a.m. with a 10 a.m. walk time. Entertainment, activities, and even dog grooming will take place throughout the morning, which concludes at 11 a.m. with a free barbeque.

?I found the Guelph event to be a good one for raising awareness and raising funds [for the Foundation],? says Chris. ?When I was asked to Chair the committee, I said sure because I know how much of a life-changer a dog can be. [Moving from a white cane to a dog] is a hard decision because you get used to what you are taught and that transition can be questionable, putting your trust in a dog and having all the responsibilities of taking care of it, and cleaning up from it. I had a good talk with one of my friends about getting a guide dog and she loved it.?

Building that trust between man and dog was the most challenging part. Using a cane you can feel everything in your path, but it can be a tall order getting into the mindset of relying on a four legged friend to guide you around the obstacles.

But, he eventually did, and once it was time for Boise's successor he asked for a more "fast-paced" dog to keep the pace. Dogs are still dogs, however, and Chris says Romaine still gets distracted here and there, but is very dedicated to his work.

So is Chris. A graduate of Seneca College training to be a social worker, he was looking to get more involved in the community, eventually finding the Lions and being tasked with this initiative.

"I hope this is an learning experience so people really get an idea of what a service dog is and what it does for its handler," says Chris. "A lot of people are really unaware of what service dogs do and the rules around them."

People are encouraged to bring their dogs out for Saturday's walk but are reminded to keep them on leash as service dogs will be on duty in their harnesses and distractions from off-leash dogs could impact the work the dogs are trained to do.

For more on the walk, to register, or make a donation, visit purinawalkfordogguides.com, click "Walk Locator" and select "Aurora."