

Pat McKenna Service Dog Interview – Part 2 – Episode 5 – Full transcript

P = Pat McKenna

R = Robyn King

S = Stephanie Shockley

[Musical intro]

R: Welcome to The Accessible Altar a podcast of conversations at the intersection of faith and disability. I'm Robyn King

S: And I'm Stephanie Shockley

R: we're your hosts! Today we pick up where we left off in Episode 4 and we continue our conversation with Pat McKenna. Pat is the Assistant Division Director at the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. He is also an attorney and a long time guide dog handler who lives with his wife and sons in central New Jersey.

In this part of the conversation we move into some of the relational and pastoral care aspects of guide dogs.

[Musical interlude]

S: So, one thing that you and I have talked about, I have a number of questions, but...

P: Sure

S: One thing that you and I have talked about is... we've talked about a little bit, we've talked about it already, you know, the bond between the handler and the dog.

P: Yeah, yeah.

S: Can you, I'd love, if you'd like to talk about it, to hear a little bit more about that. I'd also like to hear about, kind of, what,

what, these past 20 years have meant to you as far as what has been possible. What has happened for you as a result of having guide dogs. What does this mean in your daily life.

P: Hmm... so there's two...

S: There's two questions, go where you want...

P: There's two questions there. Yeah, ok.

So, can I, would it be alright if I sort of back tracked and talked maybe, it would be on guide dogs specifically, remember, that's my context, that's what I know, with an understanding that other service dogs would come from kind from a similar sort of background. I'd like to talk for just a quick moment about where they come from, if that's alright?

S: That would be great, sure.

P: So, typically, at least in many of the guide dog schools, and certainly in the case of The Seeing Eye, where my dogs are from, the dogs are bred by the school in question. And they are specifically bred for medical soundness. They are bred for longevity, they are bred for intelligence. They're actually bred for a smaller size, too, by the way. Labradors and German Shepherds being much smaller than many of their household pet equivalents. So the animals are bred in sort of these, in the breeding facility, and they are raised by a volunteer family for about a year, a year and change, maybe 15 months. And during that time period the dog, the puppy and then the young dog is introduced to a number of different settings and taught obedience and basically how to be a really good member of the household. And the puppy raisers do a fantastic job. And around 15, 16 months maybe they have to give the dog up. And the dog goes back to the school in question where formal training begins. And that might take four months, six months, it's going to differ depending upon the service we're talking about and the school we're talking about. And that's when the real training work begins. And in the case of guide dogs, that might mean identifying curbs and stairs and going around obstacles, watching

traffic, and so forth. Meanwhile, again, I'm talking about guide dogs now, specifically, you understand. A blind person who is interesting in working with a guide dog would put an application in to the guide dog school of their choice. And there could be a wait. The wait could be months, sometimes many months. And that person is matched with a dog that is the best fit for them. It's not one size fits all, right? The dogs are all so different, just like we're all different. The dogs will work at different paces and they'll have maybe a different pull, and they'll have maybe a different preference for the setting that they prefer to work in. Maybe the dog prefers a new adventure every day. Or maybe another dog prefers kind of a basic routine. Imagine a guide dog applicant who is a retired school teacher. And, in this hypothetical leaves the house three times a week. They go to their bingo night, they go to church, they go to the supermarket, that's about it. And the retired school teacher walks at a slower pace. And it's the same schedule and the same routine every week. Imagine a different applicant who's 24, and they're headed off to grad school, and they're going to be commuting into Manhattan five days a week. But, when classes are done, they're a DJ at a local restaurant. And they get home around 4 AM, and get a couple of hours of sleep before they're up again and headed back into class at 9 AM. The dog that's a good match for those two students, and there is a perfect dog for each of them, they are completely different dogs. And if you matched the dog that's the good fit for the grad student with the retired school teacher, you're going to have one extraordinarily bored dog. And if you match the dog that was the good fit for the retired school teacher with that grad student, that dog would be miserable. It would be just too much, too much activity, too much energy. So a lot, a lot a lot goes into determining which dog is the best fit and the best match for the person coming in. Based upon their lifestyle, where they work, and do they have kids, do they not, how fast do they walk. And that's important, it's one of the key pieces of making a partnership that's going to work, and keep everyone happy, and interested, and engaged. At that point the dog is maybe, oh, 20 months, ish, maybe just shy of two years. And barring any kind of medical situations the dog, maybe, can work for the person for seven, eight, maybe even nine years. Eventually, they're gonna

have to retire. And, as they get older, maybe, maybe their pace slows, or maybe arthritis. Maybe their vision starts to go. So ultimately, every service animal handler knows that there will come a day when it is time to retire their dog. And that's hard. That's really, really hard. Because you have been with this animal 24/7 from the moment you first met. From that first moment when your sitting, again, I'm going to use guide dog schools, because that's my context – you're sitting in your room at your guide dog school of choice, and your trainer knocks on the door, and they come in, and they say something like, "this is Finn, and I know he is very eager to meet you." And sometimes, because I've been through four of these introductions now, sometimes the dog is just kind of like, you know, a little too cool, you know, like "hey, what's up" you know, they come over, kind of sniff you, start sniffing the room. And other times, they just throw themselves at you. And you're already probably sitting on the floor, or sitting on the edge of your bed, you know, and then, now you've got 60 pounds of Labrador trying to be in the same space with you. Now you've got to learn how to work together. And just as each dog is different, yeah, sure, guide dogs guide people who are blind or low vision. But they're all different. And just because you just worked for eight years with your guide dog, well, your new guide dog is going to do things just a little bit differently, and you need to learn how to work together, and how to read one another. And, most importantly, how to trust one another. And at first, it can be a little raw, and maybe there's a couple of little mistakes, right, because they're learning how to read you, and you're learning how to read them. And at first, maybe you're not getting more than okay, they're going left, they're going right, they're slowing down. But as time passes, as you're with them, every moment, every day, you begin to learn and pick up on more and more. Are they stressed? Are they happy? Are they feeling well? Are they tired? Maybe they didn't sleep well. Are they hungry? Oh, they're looking at something across the street. Oh, he's looking at a dog across the street. And I know that not because I can see that there is a dog across the street, because, obviously I can't, but I know how my dog, who I've worked with for 4 ½ years, I know how he reacts, and I can pick on his sort of energy, his posture, what he's projecting, when he sees a dog

across the street. And I know what kind of dogs he likes. He likes golden retrievers, by the way. So, if he really seems interested in something across the street, I'm like, I bet he's looking at a golden retriever across the street right now. So that level of learning how to read and work with and understand your dog, it continues to develop and develop and intensify until that day when either 1. The vet says "I'm so sorry to tell you this, your dog has developed xyz and you need to think about retirement." That's a brutal message, by the way. That's what happened with my first dog. And, I was told, uh, she had developed a heart condition, a prolapsed valve, heart valve, and the vet said, yeah, she needs to be retired. She can continue to work for you for now, but you must retire this dog. And you need to have her work slower, and as infrequently as you can. It can be other medical things too. Maybe hip dysplasia or arthritis or as I mentioned before, maybe their vision starts to go. There's a number of age onset medical conditions that can result in your service animal having to be retired. Or, or, sometimes they self-retire. And they're ready. They are ready to be done, just like people, right, like, I'm good. I've done this for long enough, and I've loved it, it's been wonderful, but I'm ready to be done. And when my second dog, my second seeing eye dog began to exhibit behavior that I, I was a little confused by, like, what's he, what's he doing, I don't know what you're telling me! I've worked with you for years, I know everything you're thinking, but I don't understand this. And I finally figured it out. That's what he was telling me. He's ready, he's ready to be done. And um, medically, he was fine. He was old, older, but he was ready to stop guiding. So, I took a deep breath, and swallowed hard, because I wasn't necessarily ready for that change, but he was. And, uh, I put that application in. And that was, that was as hard as hearing that message from the vet for my first dog. Retiring your service animal is always tough. It's always tough. Because this, this is an animal that has been with you every minute of every day, maybe for many years. They have literally kept you safe. They've literally saved your life, probably more times than you're aware of, right? There are times that my guide dog has been guiding me across an intersection and he'll, he'll stop. This actually happened in Newark, New Jersey just recently. We were crossing an

intersection, and we were about halfway across, and he stops, just for a couple of seconds, and then he resumes. And the person I was with said "wow, that really well done, that guy ran the red!" I'm like (sighs loudly) yeah, alright, let's keep going. You know, deep breath, and good job, you know, and you praise them. That kind of thing probably happens to me more than I realize, and I know that. And it will be really hard for me again when my current dog has to be retired or tells me he's ready. But, where one journey ends, a new one begins, right? And as hard as that transition is, then you begin it again, with sitting on the floor, hearing that knock on your door, and the trainer coming in, and introducing you to who your new companion will be, who your new partner will be, who will be with you every moment of every day, and will keep you safe as you're crossing intersections in Newark, New Jersey or wherever you travel. And because of all of this investment, the energy, and the time, and the puppyraiser who volunteered their house to raise this dog, and the attention and time that went into breeding, and the genetics, to breed out the negative, or the conditions that you don't want, so you'd have greater longevity, you'd be more medically sound. The formal training, all the work that goes in there, all the work that the handler puts in. I mean, it's a tremendous amount of money and time and energy and love that goes into each partnership that makes it work. Which is why those distractions and interference and dog attacks are so tragic. Because, just one ill-behaved dog, on a flexileash, and just a couple of seconds out of their owner's control, can undo all of it that fast. And that's scary, and it's sad, and it happens. Now, I think I touched on one of your two questions, the bond question. I do apologize, your other part of your question I have lost track of. I think you touched a bit on the other part of the question which was just, kind of asking you to reflect a bit on, over the past 20 years, what, what having a guide dog, and again, you've had four, what having a guide dog has meant, what it has helped you to do, how has it changed your life, or benefitted your life.

P: When you are traveling independently, whether you're headed to work or the store or you are picking your child up from daycare, or you're just out for a walk, when you're doing those

things, any of those things and more, I'm speaking from my own personal experience now, from my own personal experience, to do them with a companion who has been trained to guide me, and to keep me safe... And when I say to keep me safe, I'm not talking in the defensive way, I'm talking about keep me safe from various hazards and so forth, who loves me, there is a tremendous energy in that, and confidence in that. I almost feel a little bit like, I can go anywhere. I can travel anywhere, I can go to anyplace, and I'm going to get there, and I'm going to get there safely. And I know I'm going to get there safely because I have this incredible dog with me who is going to make sure I get there safely because he's been trained to do it, and he's good at his job, he loves his job, he loves me, and we're going to figure it out. It might take a while, and we might make some wrong turns, but we're going to get there, and it's going to happen. I did not have remotely close to that level of confidence or self-assuredness prior to working with my first dog. There is a freedom and a liberation I have found in traveling with guide dogs that is unlike anything I knew previously. And it's a joy. It is an absolute joy. There are irritation moments for sure, you know, the kid who's throwing French fries at my dog, no I don't enjoy that. If I weren't traveling with a guide dog I would not be getting pelted with French fries probably. And that's annoying, sure, that's happened. Little annoyances like that have probably happened to most animal users at this point. Or the person who's petting my dog in line. And you say please stop, don't do that, and they do it anyway. This is also annoying. But, when you put all that together, the irritation of the interference, or the fear of the dog attack, or the embarrassment of being told to get your expletive dog out of my restaurant, because that's not great either, gotta tell ya, that doesn't come remotely close to how wonderful and liberating and joyful it feels to be out there and navigate with them. The two things just don't compare, they really don't.

S: So, I want to ask just to reiterate, I'm going to ask again about etiquette for the general public, and also, I think the question about, you know, what clergy should do, if, say, we wind up welcoming somebody with a service dog

P: Yeah

S: to our hosue of worship. And what I have told people before, at least what I have learned from you and other service dog handlers, is Step 1 ignore the dog, Step 2, refer back to Step 1.

P: (Laughs) yeah, yep.

S: And I, you know, so when I started, oh well, I guess I had been here a while, when I had the celebration, what they call a celebration of new ministry which is for, in the parish that I'm currently serving, you were among the many people that came. You and your wife came to be there, and to celebrate with me and whatever, and it was great. And I had actually gone and made a big fuss in my sermon in the week before about hospitality and about how we welcome people, and that welcoming people is not enough, you need to have some skill. And one of those skills is guess what, I have this dear friend who is going to be in the congregation next Saturday, and he has a guide dog, and we're not gonna touch it, and we're not gonna interact with it, and we're not gonna ask to do any of those things. And that's kind of what I've done. And one of the interesting things about that day is my youngest niece was there. And I guess she was just under three at the time. And she had been coached by her parents. There's going to be a puppy there, and he's going to look a lot like your puppy, they have this lovely lab mix at home

P: yes, yes

S: A wonderful dog, she just adores. But this puppy is a special one and he helps this person by helping show him where to go, and you're not allowed to touch him. Very basic, age appropriate for a three year old. And she, to my knowledge, did not come up to you and try to touch Finn.

P: Nope, no.

S: In fact, I think you did have some interference from someone outside of my congregation but unfortunately I wasn't about to lecture that person the week before. But that is kind of, again, my shorthand is ignore the dog, pretend the dog's not there. You don't need to interact with this dog.

P: Right.

S: Is there anything.. and, control your pet dog I guess. Is there anything else?

P: So, the big ones are... controlling your pet dog is extraordinarily important, and be aware, you might not realize it's a service animal. That's possible, that's absolutely possible. It might not always be clear. What if the individual... I'm blind, I appear as blind. I think people look at me and would know right away that I'm blind, right? But there are other disabilities where maybe it might not be apparent. And they have a dog with them.

S: Yeah, I'm thinking of a friend of mine who has a seizure alert dog.

P: Yes.

S: And that dog keeps her from having things happen like having a seizure and falling onto the subway tracks.

P: yeah. And

S: He keeps her safe, he allows her to go places. And people may not recognize. I think he has a vest or something, but people might not notice. He's like a small lab mix, and people might not know that he's a highly trained service dog.

P: yep. The dog has been trained to do this incredibly, incredibly important task. But let's imagine, it's not what you just said, but let's pretend in a hypothetical that the dog in question is a chihuahua...

S and R: (laughs)

P: Let's pretend

S: I mean, ok, we're going to take this stretch and go with you, go ahead...

P: Okay. That, that can, that's... chihuahua, dog, check, trained to alert when there's going to be seizure, right? That's service animal. Maybe the chihuahua wears a little vest. Maybe the chihuahua gets carried around. You might pass them on the street and you might not register that that is anything other than an individual carrying their pet, right? I think that's extremely reasonable. But if you go to interact or to say something or to "get your expletive pet out of my store" or they start petting the chicheucha and the person says "no, this is a service animal that has been trained to perform a particular task for the benefit of my disability" well, ok, now you know, now you're aware. Don't touch the dog. Don't offer the dog French fries. The dog is protected under federal law. The dog has a right to be in the store or the restaurant, or the hotel, and there isn't to be a cleaning fee. So be aware. Control the pet dogs. And for individuals who are in a position of authority over a space and a place and a group of people, the different preferences and needs of a service animal handler can vary widely, hugely, in fact. A general blanket rule of "there will be a service animal here, you are not to interact with it," is a great reminder right there. That's perfect, fantastic reminder! It's good for everybody, because a lot of us really like dogs, a lot. But in addition to, and beyond that, that statement of, you know, the introduction, who you are, maybe the person is arriving, they're there for the first time. "I'm so and so, I see you travel with a service animal, if there is anything that I can do that would be of benefit to you, please let me know right away." That individual will be so appreciative and thankful for that. Maybe, maybe some time spent navigating the space when it's a little less busy, with their service animal. Maybe that's beneficial. Maybe they're actually very open to taking some time to, take the harness off, and interacting with people at a certain point. And they look forward to that educational opportunity. Or maybe the

exact opposite, and they don't want the dog even looked at, right? It could be the opposite end of the spectrum. But to do that sort of blanket intro, and tell me what you might need, and what might be of benefit to you, that is always, always appreciated. And they'll tell you, they'll let you know. That's the same too, by the way, for someone in an HR department. I was told once by an HR professional "no one will ever acknowledge and look at your dog." Well, uh, you know, um, ok, thank you for that, but you know, hold on, I don't want my dog to be the proverbial elephant in the room either, right? We can do maybe a lunch and learn? I can talk a bit about it? I love my dog. I don't mind talking about him, when it is an appropriate time to talk about him. If I'm trying to wrap up some quarterly monthly reports or I'm the middle of something else, maybe not quite so much. And, we ended up in my HR example there, because this did happen, we did exactly that. We did do a lunch and learn and I took 20 minutes to just sort of educate some of my co-workers a bit about who my dog was and what he did. And it was this really great kind of educational bonding sort of moment. So you never know, and there's no way to know, not without kind of putting it forward, what would be of the greatest benefit.

Did that answer your question?

S: Absolutely.

R: Yep.

S: That's helpful. Because I think both Robyn and I of course, and perhaps other people who might listen to this interview, are in position to educate others and to kind of support somebody who comes into a space that has a service animal. So...

P: And some people might really want their dog to be as invisible as a dog can be. And that's perfectly fine, and there's nothing wrong with that. And other people might go to the far other end of it, and that's fine too. There's value in both things.

S: After my celebration, after that day, I had a number of members of my congregation who came up to me... that was on a Saturday, and they came up to me Sunday morning, and they said "whatever happened to the man with the dog?" And I said what do you mean what happened? And they said, well, we were really excited to see this dog, and we never, I guess he wasn't able to come, he had something else come up? We never saw the dog. They were really the dog. They were really upset (laughs) because they never noticed.

P: Oh, that's funny.

S: The yellow lab, sitting under the pew.

P: Yep.

S: And I said, no, no, I mean, you had reserved seats too, right, you had good seats, it wasn't like you were in the back.

P: No, no.

S: But it was, it was a testament to the good work that Finn does that people didn't even, they didn't even know he was there. I remember you saying that he was watching my niece who was a few pews ahead of him...

P: Yes

S: who was sitting on the floor playing with toys and he was watching her, kind of like hey, how come she gets to do that and I don't get to play?

P: Right, that's right. So, my current dog, I mentioned before, you know, it's great to just have them sit down and they just sleep there under the table, or the desk, or what have you. He actually never does that. He is awake the whole time. And I can tell he is just keenly watching what's going on around, just, with great interest. And even if it's really long meeting, or a really long whatever, he is alert with his ears up the entire time. My second

dog was the opposite. As soon as he was down, he was out and about a minute in, he'd be snoring, which was embarrassing. Because whether it was at a meeting or Christmas Eve services, you would hear him, he is clearly snoring, he was asleep and snoring.

S: (laughing) Oh but he was the best dog.

P: Oh, fantastic, fantastic dog.

S: He was huge too, his was really big.

P: Very big. Very big guy. My first dog would get bored and would start looking for things to do. I was in law school at the time and she would start chewing the leg of a chair, she would start chewing on her leash, and so we would get up at the end of the lecture and I'd find the leash was in like five bits at that point. Thinking I'd found a solve I'd bring a toy for her, and then just nothing but crunch crunch crunch on the nylabone under the table... okay, that's not going to work.

S: (laughing)

P: (laughing) that was tough, that was really tough. Like I said before, they're all so, so different they're so different.

S: One thing that sort of, we sort of talked around but we didn't address, and I know the answer to this but I bet a lot of people listening don't. When you retire a dog, what happens to it? Where does it go?

P: So, that depends greatly upon the circumstances of the individual who is the handler that is retiring their animal, as well as the relationship and expectations of the school that trained the animal. Now, some service animal schools retain ownership. And in those cases, maybe that school will tell you when it is time to retire the dog. And maybe that school will come and reclaim the dog at that time. One of the reasons, one of the several reasons I've only ever gone to The Seeing Eye is The Seeing Eye gives

unconditional ownership. So my four Seeing Eye dogs, they were mine, each of them. And, that means, it is then my choice, and my decision, to retire them. And then of course to decide what happens to them when they retire. Some individuals might not have the financial means or the space to have an extra dog, right? Because your guide dog is now 10, they've worked for you for 8 years, the vet says it's time, you need to retire them, their vision is going. And what if you have limited means and you live in a small apartment? You need to go and apply to get a new guide dog, and maybe you just don't have the space or the means to support your retiree. And then, in the Seeing Eye's case, The Seeing Eye will help you find a new home, or maybe you can, or the individual can find someone in their community, maybe a relation, maybe a neighbor, and so forth. Another, another factor can be... You know, you have this incredible bond, which really doesn't have any other parallels in life, so far as I can tell. And now that bond has to be broken, and you're going to bring a new dog in, and that new dog is going to be your guide dog, your service animal. You are going to forge a new bond, the old bond is broken, that chapter is closed, you're starting a new journey, a new chapter, a new bond. Well, that is something to consider. How is it going to feel with your retiree then, there present, no longer harnessed up, no longer always with you, no longer leaving with you to go to the store or to work, and they're watching you do all the same things with this new, with this new dog that you brought into the house. And some individuals say it is easier for all parties to find a new home for that retiree. So, in my particular case, I have kept all of my retired dogs. In the case of my second dog, the large one, very large, he sort of self retired. He kind of indicated in his way, communicated to me he was putting in his two weeks notice and he was done. And I will tell you, he seemed absolutely happy and joyful watching me harness up his successor and leave the house. He didn't even get up from his dog bed to say goodbye to me at the door. He was fine with it.

S: Yeah.

P: And that made me happy because I realized I'd done the right thing. He really was done and he really is thrilled to spend his last couple of years just lying on the bed in front of the fireplace.

Good for him!

My first dog though, was retired for medical reasons, that heart conditions she ended up with. She loved her work, and the vet told me she needs to be retired because of her heart condition. She did not want to be retired; she wanted to keep working. And that was a tough transition. I worked her up until I left for The Seeing Eye – you have to live at the school for few weeks to get matched up with your new dog, so I worked her up until that last day. And I went off to The Seeing Eye where I met my new dog, the big guy, and I learned to work with him, and I brought him home. I could tell it was a long time before she was okay with that. And that first day that I harnessed him up and he guided me to work – it was only a half day, I recall, she sat in her normal place to get harnessed up. But she didn't get the harness put on her. He got the harness put on him instead. And when I came home, four hours later, half day as I said, she was still sitting in that exact same spot and I just... that was hard. I didn't know, I didn't know what to do at that point, you know? Now, ultimately, she kind of got used to it, but I understand completely why someone might say "yeah, this dog wants to keep guiding me, but can't, and maybe finding them a new home is the best thing to do."

My third Seeing Eye dog was a short partnership; he self-retired after six months. He did not particularly enjoy his work, to put it simply, and so, when I began working with my current dog, who I have now, Finn, dog #4, I could almost hear retired dog #3 breathe this huge sigh of relief.

S: Yeah (laughs)

P: You know, like "oh, thank God, that other guy is going to guide him around!"

The current dog, um, I don't know. I mean, he's six and a half. I'm hoping he, I'm hoping he works for three more years or so. Maybe more. And, um, we'll see. I will know what the right course

of action is when the time comes. But right here, right now I'm now sure quite what, quite what to do.

So, that is a very long way to answer question, or way to say, it's complicated. It's very complicated.

S: It's very complicated, right.

P: Ending a relationship like that, ooh, that's tough, that's really tough.

S: So, you shared a lot there, you went into a lot of pretty, you know, challenging emotional details about

P: Yeah

S: the partnerships you've had with your four dogs, and I really appreciate that, because I think one of the things it might help people do, especially for clergy who might listen to this interview... you know, we get a lot of situations where some of the pastoral care, some of the spiritual and emotional support that we might provide to people, is around pet dogs. I have, on a number of occasions, have helped people to think, you know, to sort of think their way through the process of deciding when to euthanize a pet dog that's sick.

P: Yeah.

S: And I think it's helpful for the people to know... that's a real... things around pet dogs are important emotional, spiritual support opportunities for clergy.

P: Yeah.

S: And I think that to know that the service dog partnership is similar in some ways but very different in others,

P: Yeah

S: And that there's a whole other set of emotional/spiritual challenges, I think it's helpful for people to know that. That if you have someone in your congregation who needs to retire their service dog, it's a huge, huge, huge deal, you know. And that they might appreciate some support around that that understands that the partnership... not to put down the pet dog relationship, but that it's a different kind of partnership, and that they might need a different kind of support.

P: I was, I was at a seminar once, talking about service dogs, and some of my own experiences, this is about ten years ago. And someone stood up and they said "so these dogs have been bred and trained to do this job, and you're trusting them to do it, and, and, and he says, I apologize, I'm just not really getting what makes this works. He says, I mean, I have a dog, and I love my dog, but I'd never trust them to keep me safe out there. And he said, you're describing situations where they're literally making decisions that would impact your health, and safety, and your life. And I really appreciated kind of the question and the observation, because, um, because it's true, right? That's all true. They're out there making these decisions that impact the health, and livelihood, and the safety, and the very life, of their handler. And the work, and the energy, and all of these things that go into making that partnership work, love of course, being the most important of all of them, unless you've really been there and in it, I can't think of an analogy to use. I mean, the first thing I'm aware of when I wake up every morning is Finn. He sleeps right by my side of the bed. He sleeps in, by the way, I get up first. And although he's completely asleep, and I might be brushing my teeth in the bathroom, I know when he wakes up. And not because he starts making noise or shaking or barking, but I can just tell when he's up. And I can tell when he wants to go out. Or doesn't. And I mean, you just gain this sense of presence, of sort of what they're up to, or how they are. Or if they're sad. Or they're not well. The fact that my first dog had a heart condition, the part that stunned me wasn't that she was sick, because I already knew that. The part that stunned me was there wasn't like some medication we could give her to make her better, right? I mean, I knew, I knew something was up. I didn't know what it

was. The part that shocked me was the answer was we had to retire. Like what? Wait, we have to retire...? Hold on, then what? Like, she's been with me every minute for all of these years. She got me through law school. I sat through all those contracts classes with her, right? (Laughs). We sat and took the bar together. We crossed the stage, I got my J.D. diploma with her. They printed one out for her too, by the way, and so when I was handed mine...

S: (laughs) oh, did they?

P: They put like a tube, because, you know, it's rolled up into like a tube shape, they put the roll in her mouth. Now she dropped it of course right away, and tried to open it to find what was inside.

S: (Laughs)

P: (laughs) but the point is, she was my first guide dog, and that whole first bonding kind of experience, right, it's extremely, it's extremely powerful, and then when it ends it is hard. It is really really hard. Even when your vet is telling you you have no choice, right? No choice. Now, when I had to go through that the second time, I took great solace when I saw my dog, very large, and much older, now retired, lying in front of the fireplace, completely content. That did make me feel better. Because only then did I realize, okay, we're good. I made the right choice. He's happy so I'm happy.

But, you know, you, you um, they become a part of you, sorta, and when they retire it's... you then have to build in that distance and space. You have to, because you have to make room for the new one, and that new partnership. And there is nothing more unfair than not being emotionally available and open for that new dog who wants to be loved and who wants to work with you and who wants to be your partner. That's what they want. And if you are still grieving, on maybe your previous dog who passed, or maybe you're still just broken up over having retired your previous dog, it might not be time yet. You might not be ready yet. I've had that conversation with guide dog students. You know, their most beloved guide dog is diagnosed with a malignancy and is dead

inside of four months. Oh, my gosh, I mean, just devastating, gotta build in the space and the time to think through that and feel through that. Because if you don't, you're going to be there, at your guide dog school of choice, and you will not be in an emotional ready state to welcome that new dog into your heart. And that's not fair for them, it's not fair for the trainer who's put all that work in, and it's not fair for the person, either, right? That's just, that's just a recipe for failure. And for further heartbreak. So you gotta, you gotta navigate through that. I am fortunate that I have not had a dog that has been diagnosed with a condition like that, that results in them passing in a, you know, I mean, I mentioned before, reasons for retirement, and apologize, I did miss that one. Medical condition, self-retirement, and death is of course the third one. I have not been in that situation yet.

Did I touch on some of the... because you mentioned you had a number of questions, I don't know if I just ended up giving you more, or if I was able to address a few of them for you.

S: So you have actually covered everything I was hoping we would get to and more.

P: Wonderful

S: You, you've covered not just the sort of Disability 101 stuff that would be helpful for people to know

P: mmmhmm

S: You've covered a lot about the emotional and I would dare say spiritual aspect of people working with a service dog.

P: Yeah.

S: You've given people a sense of the depth and the importance of these partnerships. I have, I'm going to have one more questions, but I just want to find out if Robyn has any additional questions before we wrap up.

R: I just want to maybe circle back to something at the beginning that had flipped through my mind

P: Yeah

R: but your story of your first dog retiring reminded me of it. When you're talking about interference you talk about how important it is to not stimulate the dog. And I think people who don't understand dogs don't get that dogs really love having tasks. And even though the dog might seem bored, relative to how you might interact with your pet, a dog who is working is doing something and is happy.

P: Yeah, yeah. There is a real, there is a joy that comes off of them when they are doing their work, and doing it well. And believe me, they know when they're doing it well, right?

R: Yeah

P: I mean, you would think, how could, how could a dog know. Oh, they know. They so know. When, let's imagine a really dynamic setting, like a busy train station in Newark New Jersey or a construction site or even a crowded supermarket. You've got carts and they're banging into each other and you've got kids, you know, racing, and it's... there's a lot of action, and people, and sounds. And bad music playing too loud, I mean, there's all this stuff.

S: (laughs)

P: (laughs) and you're navigating through all this and you can tell your dog is working. And they are on point, and they are just acing it. And I know they're acing it, because I'm not getting banged into stuff, right? And I can hear it's happening all around, whether it's a construction site or the local Stop and Shop. And you get through the construction site or through the train station or out of the supermarket and... you know, positive reinforcement is so important, and you're always supposed to praise your dog.

When you can, you know, you can't always. When they cross the busy intersection or they get out of the crazy supermarket, and you maybe grab their ear, and say "great job, what a good dog" or whatever your preferred praise method is. And they'll look back at you, and they'll be kind of wagging, and they're almost just radiating this energy, this joy, because they know they just did a great job, and they did it for you, they did it for you. They did it to get you through that crazy crashing shopping cart maze or whatever, and they know when done it and they did it for you and they know when they've done a great job. And it's really, it's really wonderful to see. So you're right, I mean they love doing a task, and they love doing a task really really well.

So, before there was a question about what has working with guide dogs for 20 years been like for me, and I said it's just so liberating and joyful... and fun really, you know? You feel like you can do anything and go anywhere. And it kind of feels like they feel the same way. It's liberating and fun and they can just do, they can just do anything. And when you think about some of the stuff that they do, it is remarkable, it is remarkable. Like that man said to me in that seminar 10 years ago, "I don't understand how they do what they do." Well, you know, I might not completely either. But they do it, and they do it great, and I've loved each one of my four dogs for it, absolutely, no question.

S: I was, what I was going to do to wrap up just because we had gotten into

P: Yeah

S: Some really deep waters a little ways back there. I was going to ask you, if you could think,

P: yeah

S: And if you can't, that's okay. But if you can think of, of a funny guide dog story.

P: Um, so yeah, yeah.

S: Ok, awesome.

P: There are so many good ones. I'm going to give you two. I know you only asked for one, but I'm going to give you two anyway. And, the reason I'm giving you two is that I think they're very different.

The first one, um, took place also about 10 years ago, Baltimore Maryland, you know they've got that big aquarium there. My wife and I were in Baltimore for a long weekend. I was working with my second Seeing Eye dog, the really big guy afore described. We went to the dolphin show. We sit down, and the benches are all wet and stuff, because I guess water gets splashed all over the place and we figured that would be, you know, kind of fun. And even with all the water, and as wet as it was, he just, laid down and went to sleep, just like that. Didn't matter, he's out. No big deal. That's fine. And then they come out, the trainers and the dolphins, that sort of thing, And something must have, even as deep asleep as he was, caught his attention. He sat bolt upright and for the next 45 minutes I'd never seen him quite so focused and alert and awake when he wasn't actively guiding me. I mean, I was just sitting on a bench, right? That was all I was doing. Normally if I was just sitting on a bench or a chair or something he'd just be completely out. But not then, he was just, just staring in awe at the dolphins. And I thought that was really cool. And my wife was sort of convinced that the dolphins seemed to be coming over to the part of the tank/pool thing in front of us pretty frequently, so we wondered if they weren't sort of doing the same.

My other funny guide dog story... I was on a flight, I was flying to a convention in Florida. And... same dog again, by the way. All of my best stories involve that dog, by the way. And the flight attendant came to me. We were just moments from taxiing out of there. And she said, she said "sir, the pilot asked me to speak to you. Is your guide dog comfortable? You walked right by him and he noticed he was a very large dog and was concerned that maybe he didn't have enough space there tucked in under the

seat in front of you." And of course, I've got my knees up around my ears, because that's where the guide dog goes, down at your feet, when you're on a plane. And there wasn't any room, he was so big. And she said "because, there is availability in first class. And if your dog would be more comfortable, we would like to accommodate him." And I said, "Oh thank you so much, that would be..." I'd never been in first class before, right, a whole new experience. I said "that would be great, thank you so much!" So I start standing up, and he's getting up, and me and giant dog get into that little aisleway on the plane. And she says "sir, I'm so sorry, the accommodation is just for the your dog..." And of course she was joking, but it took me a moment to realize that (laughs)

S: (laughs)

P: Wait, I don't get to go up there too?? But of course I did. And it was true! In first class you get a heck of a lot more legroom, as I discovered.

R: Yeah.

P: Even enough to accommodate an 80 pound dog.

R: yeah, 80 pounds is a big dog.

P: He was big. And

S: And loonnggg....

P: He was half golden retriever, so he was like 15 feet long, you know...

S: (laughing)

P: He was, he was beautiful, he was half Labrador and half golden retriever.

S: He was a wonderful dog.

P: He was a wonderful dog, yeah.

S: Once again, we've been speaking with Pat McKenna, who has been giving us really wonderful in-depth look at a lot of the different questions about service dogs and their handlers and how that partnership works. So thank you much for being here.

P: Thank you, it's been a pleasure. I always enjoy talking about service animals, and please reach out if you have any questions or anything comes up in the future.

[musical interlude]

R: Thank you for joining us for this conversation about faith and disability. We encourage you to find local conversation partners to talk about your experiences of faith and disability with.

Stephanie, before I ask you if you have any last comments, I just want to begin by noting that a) we have a ton of show notes from these episodes, so if you didn't check them out last month, please do this month. And b) we went sort of back and forth a bit about whether or not to include this whole interview, because it was really long, but it was really beautiful, and we thought it was really important to have both sort of some of the legalities and technicalities and we did last time, but also to have some of that relationship and talk about some of those needs for pastoral care that will pop up in any relationship like this.

S: You did a pretty good job of summarizing what that was.

R: I feel a little bad, I also feel like we should have warned everyone that they might want Kleenex around [laughs] we both cried in having this conversation and then in the editing and transcribing of this conversation.

S: Yeah, I was, I'm not going to say I was as cool as a cucumber as we were recording it, you can hear that I'm a little bit nervous as I'm asking questions but when I was transcribing it... that was when it really got to me [laughs].

R: This is a conversation I was super glad that you were taking some of the lead on because I kept having to mute my mic because I was crying for parts of it.

S: Yeah, it was a very intense interview. I felt like, um, one of the things I really appreciated about this interview was that Pat really dug in emotionally. Like I felt like he was very present and wasn't just, kind of, giving the talking points. Obviously he knows the talking points about service dogs inside and out, he knows the law, he has served as a consultant for others who need help dealing with access issues and other legal issues related to services dogs. So he knows the law inside and out, and he knows the talking points inside and out. But he went really beyond that, to give a sense of, like Robyn just said, of the emotional and pastoral issues one might encounter if you know somebody, you have someone in your congregation for example, that has a service dog. So he really opened up about what that experience is like.

R: It was so very gracious of him and I'm incredibly thankful.

[musical interlude]

S: You have been listening to The Accessible Altar, a podcast at the intersection of faith and disability, hosted by Robyn King and Stephanie Shockley. We record on the traditional land of the Leni Lenape and Treaty 6 Territory.

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