

Visionary

Edition **60**
July
2026

**Collaboration and
Co-operation**
across guide dog
organisations

A Tribute to
Sharon and Eric Loori,
Freedom Guide Dogs
for the Blind

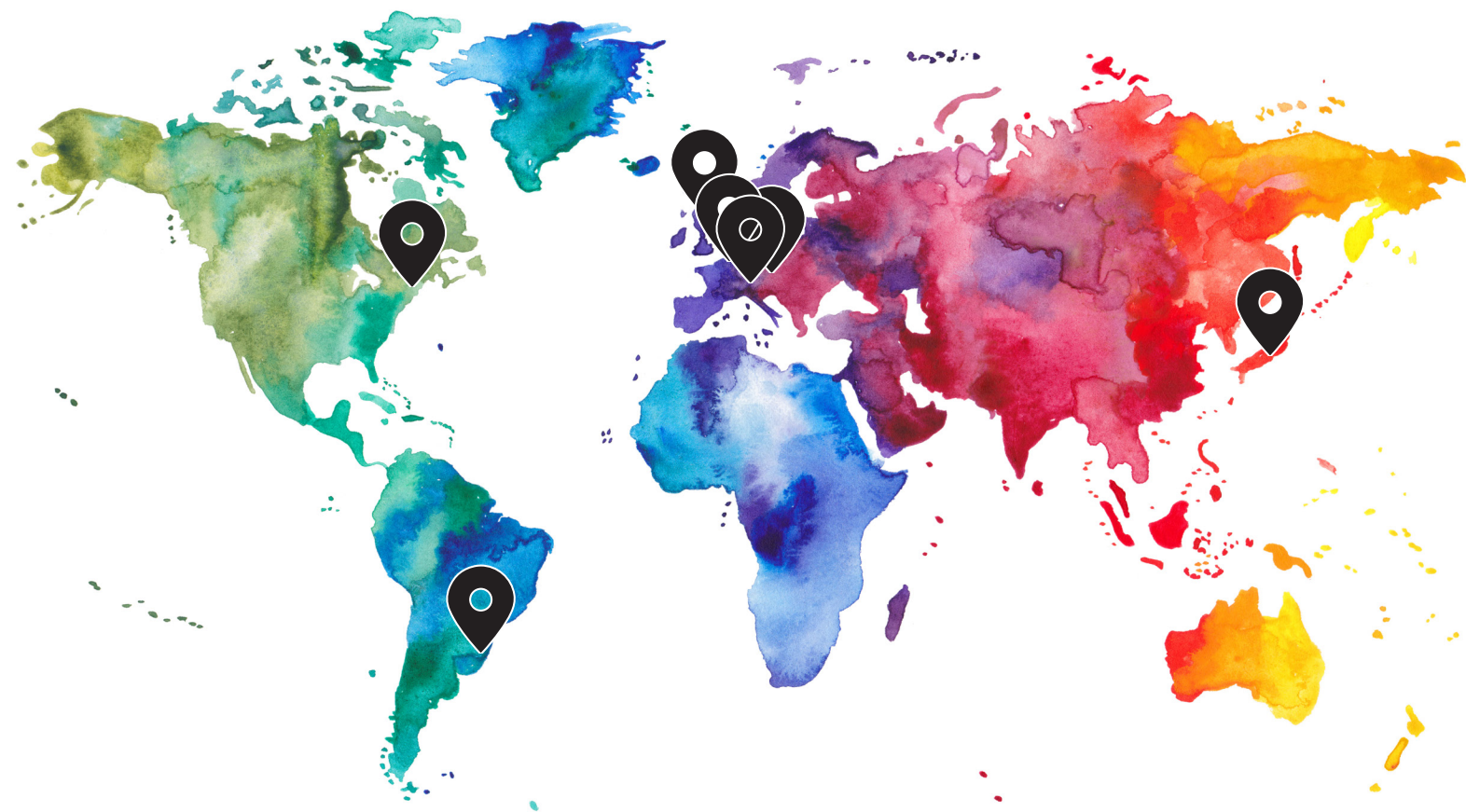


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First and foremost, membership of the IGDF enables Guide Dog Schools around the world to join a community dedicated to serving the visually impaired. That community needs and wants to share its knowledge and the IGDF facilitates that.

The map below outlines the contributing countries for this edition of Visionary – **Brazil, Czech Republic, France, Japan, Switzerland, UK, USA**



Cover Photo

Christine Baroni-Pretsch receiving the Ken Lord award from Masahito Kanetaka and Antoine Bouissou at the 2026 IGDF Conference in Yokohama

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Message From The Chair

Bill Thornton | Chief Executive Officer
BC & Alberta Guide Dogs, Canada

It was a pleasure to see so many of you at the 2026 IGDF Conference in May, superbly hosted by the Japan Guide Dog Association (JGDA). Records were broken with more than 400 delegates attending. Particularly impressive given that the previous conference took place less than a year earlier. It also clearly demonstrates the importance our members place on professional development opportunities provided by the IGDF. Congratulations to the Japan Guide Dog Association for pulling this off in less than 9 months – Arigatou Gozaimasu.

Congratulations and thank you, to the entire team at JGDA for an exceptional conference and location. A selection of photos can be found on page 24, with a much larger gallery available on the IGDF website.

Once again, “Wordly” translation software enabled delegates to listen to presentations in their own languages. This year, for the first time, presenters were also able to deliver their presentations in their own languages using the same technology. Your IGDF is firmly committed to breaking down language barriers and ensuring that everyone has access to the lat-est knowledge and best practice.

The conference once again provided the opportunity to hold a Senior Leaders Networking Event. More than 40 CEOs, Directors and Trustees from member organisations came together to discuss

continued

Message From The Chair

key projects and strategic opportunities for the future. Executive Director David Maynard is working with the Communications Committee to build on the success of this initiative. We will hold another Senior Leaders networking event during the 2028 Conference and plan to deliver at least one online event in the interim.

I would also like to thank the IGDF Conference Programme Committee, led by Christine Baroni-Pretsch, for developing such an excellent programme of world-class speakers. Christine has devoted decades of her life to IGDF and to advancing quality guide dog services around the world. It was especially fitting to see her dedication and commitment recognised with the 2026 Ken Lord Award.

We now look forward to our next conference, which will take place in New Jersey, USA, from June 22nd to 25th, 2028. This will be a special occasion as we join with our 2028 hosts, The Seeing Eye, to celebrate their 99th year of continuous service. The conference promises to be a memorable event as we recognize their remarkable milestone together. The IGDF Board, and The Seeing Eye team, are very much looking forward to welcoming you to the 20th IGDF Conference.

It was with profound sadness that we learned of the untimely passing of our friends and colleagues, Eric and Sharon Loori who very recently passed away just weeks apart from each other. Through the founding and long service of Freedom Guide Dogs (1992), they dedicated their lives to serving others and set an example

for us all. Over their time together at Freedom Guide Dogs, they graduated over 700 guide dog partnerships. Please see the tributes on pages 6-9.

I am delighted to confirm, that we have now, successfully migrated the existing IGDF Education content to its new home on the IGDF Academy Moodle site. This marks the first im-portant step in our journey to establish the IGDF Academy as a modern learning manage-ment system that will educate and support Guide Dog Mobility Instructors (GDMIs) and Guide Dog Trainers (GDTs) of the future. Please see page 5 for details on how to access the new site.

We have also completed a recruitment search for two new IGDF staff members to lead and support this project. We will very shortly be able to introduce our two new IGDF team members to you. The Academy Project remains the IGDF Board's highest strategic priority. I would like to thank everyone who has already contributed to this important work. We are excited about the Academy and optimistic about its goal of professionalizing the core group of professionals within the IGDF organizations, while strengthening education across our sector.

Wishing your organization, staff and volunteers all the very best.



William S. Thornton GDMI
Chair IGDF



IGDF Recruitment

IGDF is inviting expressions of interest for two new members to join the Standards Committee, encouraging representatives from Europe and Asia to apply.

We are also seeking contributors for a temporary working group to develop the IGDF Prison Facility Standard for puppy raising. Members operating facility-based programs are strongly encouraged to participate and share their expertise.

This is a valuable opportunity to help shape the standards guiding our sector, while gaining insight into the diversity and shared practices of organisations worldwide.

For more information, see our IGDF What's New page. Please send expressions of interest including a CV and covering letter, providing a summary of your professional skills and experience to enquiries@igdf.org.uk by Monday 31st August 2026.

IGDF Education Platform (Moodle)

IGDF has now moved the existing IGDF Education courses to a new hosting platform as part of the IGDF Academy project.

All registered users will have received an email explaining how to log in to the new platform, where you will be able to

access all the existing content. New users can [follow this link to register](#). This new platform utilises the latest Moodle software, providing improvements in functionality, accessibility, usability and capacity. Work continues on the development of new IGDF Academy content, which we hope to launch by June 2028.

IGDF Assessments

Congratulations to the following organisations which have passed their accreditation assessments:

- Pomocné tlapky o. p. s. (Helping Paws), Czech Republic
- Chubu Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, Japan
- Nippon Lighthouse Guide Dog Training Center, Japan

Congratulations to the following organisations who have become an AO with IGDF:

- Dogs4blind, Belgium
- Dogs for Care, Netherlands

We say goodbye to the following organisation, whose Membership status has lapsed:

- Geleidehondenschool Herman Jansen BV, Netherlands

In Memoriam: Sharon Loori



A young Sharon and Eric Loori giving a demonstration at a local community event

The International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF) joins Freedom Guide Dogs and the wider guide dog community in mourning the passing of Sharon Loori, co-founder of Freedom Guide Dogs USA.

Together with her husband, Eric Loori, who passed away 8 weeks ago, Sharon founded Freedom Guide Dogs in 1992 with a vision of expanding independence and opportunity for people who are blind or have low vision. Through their shared dedication, compassion, and leadership, they built an organisation that has positively impacted countless lives.

For more than three decades, Sharon played a pivotal role in developing Freedom Guide Dogs' breeding programme, helping to establish generations of guide dogs.

Her commitment to excellence leaves a lasting legacy that continues through the many partnerships these dogs have made possible.

The influence of Sharon's work extends far beyond her organisation. Her contributions to the guide dog movement have helped advance the life-changing bond between guide dogs and the people they serve, creating opportunities for greater independence and inclusion for many individuals.

On behalf of the IGDF membership and global guide dog community, we extend our sincere condolences to Eric and Sharon's family, friends, colleagues, and all those at Freedom Guide Dogs. We honour her remarkable commitment and the enduring legacy both she and Eric leave behind.

My Apprenticeship Journey Across Two Schools

Shiori Nishida
**Freedom Guide Dogs
for the Blind**

A Tribute to My Mentor, Eric Loori

Eric Loori, along with his wife Sharon, founded Freedom Guide Dogs for the Blind in 1992. Based in central New York, Freedom has created more than 600 guide dog teams serving clients mainly on the East Coast of the United States.

The Hometown Training Program allows clients to receive fully customized training in their own homes, focusing on local routes and familiar environments.

With more than 40 years of experience in the guide dog field, including roles at three other guide dog organizations, Eric was especially known for his work with clients with multiple disabilities.

His warm heart, dedication to helping others, and significant presence within the IGDF community left a lasting impact. Eric not only transformed the lives of countless clients but also profoundly influenced my journey as an apprentice through his passion and mentorship.

My Apprenticeship Journey

Every guide dog organization has its own unique apprenticeship program, and my journey to becoming a Guide Dog Mobility Instructor (GDMI) has been shaped by experiences at two schools. My career started at the School for Guide Dog Trainers at the Japan Guide Dog Association (JGDA), led by Sam Tawada, where I learned to train dogs, perform kennel work, and attend various lectures on canine and vision impairment.



Eric with IGDF Chair Bill Thornton, receiving the John Groom Long Service Award in recognition of 43 years of dedicated service at the IGDF Conference in Yokohama, Japan.



Eric and Shiori at the 2026 IGDF Conference with Matthew Bottomley and David Sutch

After three years, I was qualified as a Guide Dog Trainer (GDT) and started taking part in many fields besides dog training and client work that JGDA does to serve the visually impaired, such as instructing puppy raisers, taking part in fundraising events, going out for PR activities, helping out with rehabilitation programs, and joining the international work with the IGDF, building relations with other guide dog schools around the world.

These diverse experiences broadened my understanding of vision impairment and guide dogs, while also deepening my desire to focus on client work. With the very complex working environment for guide dogs, the need for detailed training, and the standards of the National Federation

of Guide Dog Facilities, apprenticeships in Japan usually take longer than in other countries (3 years for GDT and another 2+ years for GDMI). I was struggling on the long apprenticeship path and having second thoughts about my career direction.

Freedom's specialty in the Hometown Training Program, combined with efficient dog-client matching, enabled me to gain extensive experience in a short period. I also had the opportunity to work with a variety of breeds. While I focused on Labradors and Golden Retrievers in Japan, I worked with Labs, Goldens, Collies, Lollies (Lab-Collie mix), Poodles, and Bouviers at Freedom. Each breed's unique temperament challenged me to adapt my

training methods, making the process both exciting and rewarding. The whole new experience of cultural and environmental differences in the training, along with the variety of clients, has opened my mind to many new things.

One of the most significant challenges at Freedom is creating personalized training programs for clients. Since many of the clients live so far away from the Freedom campus, I usually meet them in person and see where they live on the first day of the placement. This responsibility pushed me to think creatively and focus on understanding each client's individual needs, helping them achieve greater independence with their new partners. The clients themselves have been my greatest teachers, inspiring me to keep improving every single day. As an apprentice with 6 years of experience in this field, Freedom is the perfect place to develop my skills.

The Role of the IGDF Community

Throughout my career, the IGDF community has always been an invaluable source of support. No matter the country, organization, or role, the shared knowledge and experience across the IGDF members are truly precious. I am deeply grateful to all the IGDF schools and colleagues I have connected with through visits and conferences for their willingness to share their best practices and insights.

As I prepare to complete my GDMI accreditation this fall, I reflect on the skills and lessons I have gained from both JGDA and Freedom, as well as the wider IGDF community. I hope that future generations will continue to engage even more with this incredible network, so the legacy of the

guide dog movement can be passed on from generation to generation, just as Eric guided me further into this world.

With the foundation I have built through my apprenticeship journey, I am eager to take the next step in my career and serve as many clients as possible, helping them achieve greater freedom and independence with their guide dogs.



Eric training a fawn Bouvier, demonstrating his expertise in preparing guide dogs.

Collaboration Between the Japan Guide Dog Association and the University of Tokyo

Shinji Tanaka
Japan Guide Dog Association



Shinji with conference participant trial walking with a guide dog from JGDA

Guiding Guide Dog Training: From Individual Insight to Collective Knowledge

The desire to “go where you want, when you want” should be naturally fulfilled for everyone. However, in Japan, for people with vision impairments who wish to walk with a guide dog, this is unfortunately not yet the norm.

There are several reasons for this situation, including a shortage of guide dog trainers, a lack of suitable candidate dogs with the aptitude to become guide dogs, and insufficient societal understanding of vision impairments and guide dogs.

To address these issues, a groundbreaking research collaboration between the Japan Guide Dog Association and the

University of Tokyo began in 2019—the first of its kind in Japan. This initiative aims to combine the experience and knowledge accumulated by organisations involved in guide and assistance dog programs with the academic expertise of researchers from one of Japan’s leading institutions, particularly in fields such as life sciences and information engineering.

The research themes include efforts to increase the number of high-quality guide dogs. For example, one project incorporates genetic analysis to breed dogs that not only possess the necessary traits to become guide dogs but are also healthy. Another project utilizes virtual reality (VR) technology to deepen public understanding of vision impairments and guide dogs by offering simulated experiences, such as guide dog walking

and low-vision perspectives, making these experiences more relatable.

One of the research themes also focuses on training the next generation of guide dog trainers. By applying engineering approaches, this project aims to ensure stable and effective development of young trainees into professional trainers while preserving and passing down not only the technical skills of experienced trainers but also the mindset and values embedded in those skills.

In May 2026, this research was presented at the IGDF Conference in Yokohama, Japan, where I had the opportunity to speak alongside Professor Yasutoshi Makino, one of our collaborators from the University of Tokyo.

It will likely take time for these research outcomes to be fully implemented in real-world settings. However, if we can quantify and visualize the invisible sensory



Shinji presenting at the IGDF Conference

judgments of individual trainers, these insights can be preserved as shared assets and eventually evolve from “shared knowledge” into “collective intelligence.”

Although the collaboration with the University of Tokyo is still relatively new, we hope to continue expanding our partnership across various fields, leveraging cutting-edge academic knowledge to build a better future.



Masahito Kanetaka, Shinji Tanaka, Yasutoshi Makino and Bill Thornton

Support for a Relocating Guide Dog Owner

Paco Villalvilla,
Guide Dogs UK

Recently, I was contacted by Toby Contreras from Guide Dogs for the Blind (USA) about one of their clients, Kate Middleton, who was about to start studying at Newbattle Abbey College in Scotland, UK. Kate was relocating from the US with her guide dog and had asked for some support to get oriented around the college campus once she arrived.

As someone originally from Spain, now working for Guide Dogs UK, I've always been aware of how international our profession really is. But this felt like a particularly nice example of that in practice. An American client, trained by a US school, coming to Scotland, supported by a Spanish instructor working in the UK. It's a good illustration of how borders don't really define the support we can offer.

I met with Kate shortly after she arrived, and we spent a few hours working through key routes around the campus, looking at access points, main buildings, and helping her build a mental map of the environment with her dog. It was a fairly straightforward piece of work on the surface, but it made a real difference at an important moment for her, as she was settling into a completely new place.

But what was really interesting to me was the clear line of communication, a shared understanding of what was needed, and a trust that the support provided by us in the UK would align with the work already done by her home school. That level of consistency doesn't happen by accident; it reflects the shared standards and professional values across IGDF organisations.



Kate and Bistro navigating the stairs in Newbattle Abbey College with Paco



Kate checking the GDUK harness

From a mobility perspective, working with a client in a new country always brings interesting challenges. Even familiar tasks, like route planning or environmental problem-solving, can feel different when the layout and infrastructure change (and, as it turns out, cars insist on driving on the “wrong” side of the road in the US!). Despite that, the fundamentals remain the same, and it was clear how transferable Kate's skills were, making her and her dog Bistro a very capable partnership even in unknown territory.

For me personally, it was also a reminder of how fortunate we are to be part of a global network that allows this kind of collaboration to happen so naturally. It would have been easy for Kate to arrive and have to figure things out on her own, but instead, a simple connection between organisations meant she had immediate, relevant support in place.

By the end of our session, Kate had a good working knowledge of the campus and, more importantly, the confidence to start navigating it independently as she began her studies. That immediate impact (at the right time) is exactly what good collaboration should achieve.

It's only a small example, but I think it reflects something important. IGDF isn't just about standards or assessments, it's about connection. It's about knowing that wherever a guide dog user goes, there is a network of professionals who share the same principles and are willing to step in and support when needed.

In this case, one email led to a few hours of practical work, but behind that was something much bigger: a shared commitment across countries, organisations, and individuals to make sure guide dog users are supported wherever they are in the world.



Paco, Kate and Bistro outside the College

Collaborating as an IGDF Applicant Organisation

Leonardo Nunes
Instituto Federal Catarinense (IFC) –
Camboriú Campus, Brazil

Between September and October 2025, I had an experience that I consider a milestone in my career as a guide dog mobility instructor and educator. I spent several days at each of four North American guide dog schools — The Seeing Eye, the Guide Dog Foundation, Guiding Eyes for the Blind, and Dogs Inc. — experiencing their daily training routines and exchanging knowledge with more experienced instructors.



Thibaut Blairon visiting Leonardo in Brazil

The idea of visiting different schools, each with its own training methodologies, came as a result of discussions with GDMLs Lukas Franck (The Seeing Eye) and Marc Lyell (Guide Dogs Queensland), in January 2022. At the time, we were seeking advice from the IGDF Development Committee, then chaired by Mr. Franck, on how to hire an experienced professional for a mentorship at our institution. The recommendation was that I visit different institutions and observe which techniques would best suit our reality, considering the environmental differences between Brazil and other countries. In 2023, at the IGDF Seminar in Vancouver, we revisited the conversation about this possibility. And in 2025, I finally fulfilled this aspiration for learning at North American schools.

The purpose of the visit was to deepen my knowledge of different guide dog training techniques and methodologies, and to understand how training is conducted at the schools visited, establishing a comparison with the work carried out at our institution. To identify similarities,

differences, strengths, and weaknesses in our program, thereby improving daily practice and raising quality standards, in alignment with IGDF Standards.

Although conceived in 2022, the initiative only moved forward in mid-April 2025, when I contacted the IGDF Development Committee — then supported by Zuhey Medina — to seek support. The Committee embraced the idea, in partnership with The Seeing Eye, the Guide Dog Foundation, Guiding Eyes for the Blind, and Dogs Inc.

Given the high exchange rate of the U.S. dollar against the Brazilian real, my experience was made possible by the schools' support. Each school hosted me at their own facilities — a fundamental condition for making this valuable immersion happen.

Among the aspects that most enriched my learning, I highlight the welcoming and collaborative environment, with helpful people open to dialogue and knowledge sharing. The exchanges with experienced instructors and the

discussions on techniques and practices broadened my understanding of the guide dog movement in the United States and worldwide, bringing greater clarity on the paths ahead. I was also able to expand my perspective on different training methods and draw comparisons with the work we do at our institution, identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as aspects that can be improved — both in training methods and in classes with clients.

Since the Guide Dog Program at Instituto Federal Catarinense not only trains and provides guide dogs to society but also educates new trainers and mobility instructors, the insights from this experience are being shared with both fellow instructors and students who will become future professionals.

My sincere gratitude to The Seeing Eye, especially to CEO Karen Leies, Director of Training and Instruction Jim Kessler, and friend Lukas Franck, for the warm welcome, support, and the opportunity to closely observe the institution's outstanding work.

I also thank Guiding Eyes for the Blind, Director of Training Gerald Brenninkmeyer, and GDML Ben Cawley, for their generous reception, guidance, and opportunity to deepen knowledge and experience.

My thanks further extend to the Guide Dog Foundation, especially David Locklin and GDMLs Olivia Eden, Laurel Sheets, and Mark Briganti, for their teaching, receptiveness, and support during my stay.

Finally, I thank Dogs Inc., Zuhey Medina, and GDML/COMS Christie Henry as well as her husband Will Henry GDML/COMS (Guide Dogs for the Blind), for their hospitality, support, and fundamental contribution to enriching this professional and personal experience.

I returned to Brazil with a deep sense of gratitude for everyone I met along the way and who contributed to my professional growth. I carry with me lessons, partnerships, and references that will certainly strengthen and expand the guide dog movement in Brazil.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to GDML Thibaut Blairon for visiting the Instituto Federal Catarinense (IFC) in September 2025. During his three-day visit, our team and guide dog trainer apprentices benefited from valuable knowledge sharing and professional guidance. His recommendations helped identify opportunities to further improve our program and strengthen our alignment with the IGDF Standards. He also delivered a training session on guide dog instruction, and some of the practices he shared have already been incorporated into our training methodology. We are grateful to Thibaut and the IGDF for this valuable opportunity to learn, grow, and continue enhancing our program.

Leonardo is a Professor and Guide Dog Mobility Instructor at the Instituto Federal Catarinense (IFC) – Camboriú Campus. He specializes in the technical training of professionals and the development of assistive technologies for people with visual impairments. Furthermore, he is an active collaborator in technical and scientific knowledge-sharing networks within the sector.

He is available to the IGDF, guide dog schools, and GDMLs for sharing knowledge and experiences regarding the guide dog universe and people with visual impairments: leonardo.nunes@ifc.edu.br

The Derek Freeman Scholarship: A Joint Journey for Mathilda Guide Dogs and Opaskoirakoulu

Linda Luksa
**Mathilda Guide Dog
Association**



GDUK Staff with Daniela & Linda from Mathilda and Heidi & Minna from Opaskoirakoulu

Mathilda Guide Dogs (Czech Republic) and Opaskoirakoulu (Finland) were honored to receive the Derek Freeman Scholarship last summer (2025). With our joint application, we requested two organizations to host us and share their expertise: Guide Dogs (UK) and Guide Dogs for the Blind (US).

Though the primary focus of the DF Scholarship is on improving breeding and puppy raising, staff at smaller organizations like ours usually wear many different hats. Therefore, we asked both host organizations to show us “the whole picture.” Both agreed, and because dog training and client work are ultimately the most important outcomes of breeding

and puppy raising, this approach added immense value to our stays. Large and small schools each have different advantages, challenges, and opportunities, and there is so much we can learn from one another. Spending two weeks at two of the world’s largest guide dog schools was very inspirational, and the chance to speak directly with experts in our field provided a wealth of knowledge.

While in the United Kingdom, the staff of both our schools shared accommodation. Later, thanks to the hospitality of Guide Dogs for the Blind (US), we had the chance to stay in their student accommodation. Staying in the same space allowed us to continue a mutual exchange of ideas and

experiences from our own schools late into the night. As an extra bonus, staying on campus gave us a deeply immersive experience of the organization’s culture. It also allowed us to bond with clients who started their training class on the exact day we arrived; following their progress and chatting with them over dinner was very enriching.

The benefits of this placement will extend far beyond our two organizations. As members of a small breeding collaborative – the Service Dog Breeders’ Fellowship (SDBF) – the knowledge we gained will help the rest of our members (Baráthegeyi in Hungary and Dogs for Life in Slovakia) improve their breeding and puppy raising programs as well, through presentations and shared tips.

We highly encourage smaller organizations to apply for and experience these placements together; having the chance to compare best practices from multiple perspectives is very inspiring.

We would like to express our deepest thanks to both Guide Dogs UK and Guide Dogs for the Blind, USA for accepting our application, and to all their staff for allowing us a “behind-the-scenes” look at their operations.

Sharing this knowledge will have an immense impact on the lives of people with visual impairment in our home countries.

A special thank you goes to Chris Benninger, Hannah Fellows, Lauren Holtz, and Tim Stafford.



GDB Staff with Daniela & Linda from Mathilda and Heidi & Minna from Opaskoirakoulu

French Guide Dog Movement Gathers in Opio to Shape the Future

William Bastel,
French Federation of
Guide Dogs (FFAC)



A conference session on the evolving place of animals in society

From 8 to 10 April 2026, the French guide dog movement gathered in Opio, in the south of France, for the National Guide Dog Congress, hosted by Provence Côte d'Azur Corse guide dog association who celebrated their 60th anniversary.

Nearly 300 people from the FFAC network: guide dog users, instructors, professionals, volunteers, staff members and representatives of the 14 member associations, came together for three days of discussion, learning and shared reflection. The opening ceremony set the tone for the congress: unity, solidarity between schools, and a shared ambition to continue improving access to guide dogs for people with visual impairment.

The congress focused on three major themes shaping the future of the sector.

The first was animal welfare, explored through legal, ethical, scientific and practical perspectives, including the changing status of animals in society and the specific role of the guide dog. A key message emerged strongly: the welfare of a guide dog and the autonomy of a guide dog user are not to be opposed; they are deeply connected. FFAC also presented its work on a dedicated animal welfare committee, designed to support schools, harmonise practices and develop tools rooted in science and international standards.

A second major theme was the changing needs of people with visual impairment. Presentations and workshops addressed mobility, ageing, autonomy, access to complementary services, users' expectations and the role of new technologies.

The HOMERE study, with more than 2,200 respondents, provided valuable insight into daily life, mobility and accessibility challenges. Other sessions explored how guide dog schools can become wider resource centres, offering support in areas such as orientation and mobility, daily living skills, psychological support, training, employment and social inclusion. In the third theme, new technologies, including GPS, smart devices and artificial intelligence, were discussed as complementary tools: not as replacements for guide dogs, but as part of a broader ecosystem of independence.

Beyond the conference sessions and workshops, the Congress was designed as a truly inclusive event. An exhibition village enabled each member association to show its work through one of the three main themes of the Congress, fostering dialogue and the sharing of experiences across the network. Inclusive sporting activities brought participants together in a spirit of "sport for all", combining adapted physical activities and disability-awareness experiences. Accessibility was further strengthened through a dedicated



Congress exhibition stands

app' providing real-time information and exhibition content for participants with visual impairments. The programme also included a ceremony recognising the commitment of members across the movement, alongside the celebration of guide dog instructors who have graduated in the last four years.

Together, these initiatives reflected one of the Congress's central messages: inclusion is built not only through discussion and reflection, but also through participation, accessibility, recognition and shared experiences.



Qualified GDMIs receive their diplomas during the Congress closing ceremony

Breeding Better Guide Dogs by Sharing a Vision

Christine Baroni-Pretsch
Fondation romande pour chiens
guides d'aveugles, Switzerland



Christine with other attendees of the European Breeding Network Conference

As a relatively new member of the IGDF, attending the IGDF conference in New York City in 2006 was a very exciting experience. I never in my wildest dreams would have imagined how groundbreaking this trip would be for the breeding of our future guide dogs. Dr Eldin Leighton presented about breeding, selection, EBV's, phenotypes and genotypes and working together. I certainly didn't understand every detail of his presentation, but it became clear to me that we cannot achieve anything on our own and that we need to work together with other schools in order to make a significant difference and improve the quality of our dogs.

Based on the model of the Original Group (The Seeing Eye, Guide dogs for the Blind, Guiding Eyes for the blind, GDUK, KNGF, Guide Dogs Victoria), I contacted breeding managers from schools in Mainland Europe with either a big colony or a veterinarian or geneticist as breeding manager. The responses were all positive and we hosted the inaugural meeting of the EBN (European Breeding Network) in November 2007 at our school in Switzerland.

We spent two days together learning to get to know each other and defining traits we wanted to improve in our colonies. Eldin told us that the most important decision is: How do you decide which animal is allowed to reproduce?

Seems to be quite a simple statement, but how can we do this? You need also to define common goals, collect and exchange true data and define the criteria for selecting the replacement breeders. Other points that are important to me include building trust, respecting the written agreement and exchanging puppies, adult breeders or semen free of charge.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of Dr Eldin Leighton, Jane Russenberger and Paul Keymer (Minnesota Breeding Centre), tools now in widespread use, such as the BCL temperament scoring system and the IWDR database, have been developed. We are now able to use EBV's (estimated breeding values) to understand the genetic value of our breeding stock and make the right choices.

The group's mission is as follows: EBN has the desire to develop methods for breeding the best guide or other assistance dogs possible by sharing innovative ideas and resources.

The founding members are: Fondation romande pour chiens guides d'aveugles, (Switzerland), KNGF (Netherlands),



EBN Conference attendees

Fundacion ONCE del Perro Guía (Spain), ACGAO (France) and GDSF (Finland). As the journey continued IGDB (Ireland), CESECAH (France), GDUK (UK) and BCG (Belgium) joined the group. The participating schools are keen to make a long-term commitment.

Last but not least, the group would like to express their deepest gratitude to Dr Eldin Leighton and Jane Russenberger for their generous guidance and support.



Refreshments at the European Breeding Network Conference

From Evidence to Impact: Shaping Global Airline Standards

Tamara Searant,
**Chair of the ADI & IGDF Joint
Advocacy Committee**



Air travel campaign image of a guide dog handler walking to an airport check-in counter

The establishment of the ADI/IGDF International Advocacy Committee marked a significant shift in how our sector approaches global systems change. Bringing together Assistance Dogs International and the International Guide Dog Federation into a single, coordinated advocacy voice, the Committee was built on a clear premise: that collective action, backed by robust evidence, could achieve what fragmented national advocacy could not.

Its work with the International Air Transport Association (IATA) has proven that premise right.

Aviation was an early priority. Guide and assistance dog handlers consistently face inconsistent policies, unclear verification requirements, and access barriers that vary, often arbitrarily, between carriers and countries. The Committee engaged directly with IATA, framing these not as individual grievances but as a global systems failure requiring coordinated industry response.

The evidence to make that case came from the Paws for Access report, the first global survey of its kind, capturing the experiences of over 1,000 guide and assistance dog handlers across

20 countries. Transport barriers featured prominently in the findings, giving the Committee a powerful, unified evidence base that elevated lived experience into a global narrative. It was no longer possible to treat inconsistent airline access as an edge case.

That evidence opened doors. The Committee secured several seats on IATA's working group developing formal guidance for service dogs in air travel, positioning the sector not as an external commentator, but as an active participant in shaping the outcome.

What followed was sustained, substantive collaboration. Members of the ADI/IGDF Joint Advocacy Committee attended regular working group meetings alongside global industry stakeholders. They contributed directly to drafting key components of the guidelines, including the international definition of an assistance dog, standards for training and behaviour, and frameworks for identification and verification.

This was not a consultation process where sector input was noted and largely set aside. It was the sector influencing from within, bringing technical expertise, handler experience, and cross-national insight into an industry process with genuine global reach.

The resulting guidelines represent something significant: a common international framework where none previously existed, and a foundation that airlines and regulators can build on. For handlers, that means greater consistency, clearer expectations, and a stronger basis on which to assert their rights.

For the ADI/IGDF International Advocacy Committee, this outcome reflects a broader model, one that is already being applied across other advocacy priorities. Evidence, access, and direct engagement with the systems that shape daily life: that is the formula. The IATA work shows it delivers.

The updated IATA guidance can be found here: <https://www.iata.org/content/ac44a10b83ccf5560c1b308/guidance-on-service-dogs.pdf>



Tamara Searant

IGDF Conference 2026: Yokohama, Japan



Knowledge Sharing Webinars

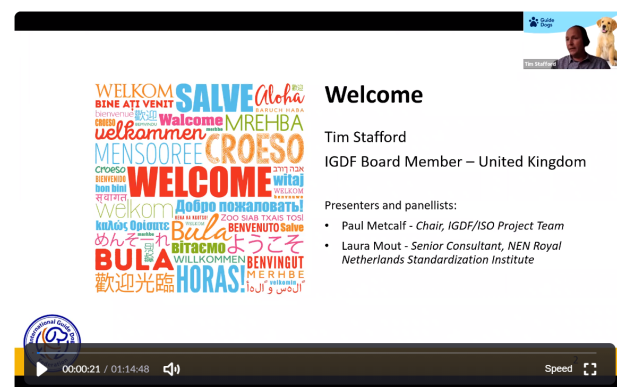
Stay in touch with news, research, and best practice from around the world by attending our regular webinars. Webinars are open to all IGDF Members, Affiliates, Applicant Organisations and Enquiring Organisations. Registration details are circulated by the IGDF Office and are available on the IGDF website.

Conference Recordings

Recordings of presentations at the 2026 IGDF conference are now available to view on the IGDF website's webinar page [here](#)

Puppy Raising Quarterly Call

The first topic-based meeting for Puppy Raising Managers is being planned by the IGDF Puppy Raising Group and will take place in the next couple of months. Please look out for an email or keep an eye on our upcoming webinars page for details.



Webinar Presenters Wanted

We are looking for volunteers interested in sharing their knowledge with the IGDF community. This could include a tour of your facilities, an introduction to a new programme or project, or an in-house presentation you think the wider IGDF community would be interested in.

We welcome pre-recorded presentations, including presentations not in English.

Please contact the IGDF office at enquiries@igdf.org.uk



Visionary

Next Issue

The deadline for articles for the next issue of Visionary is: **1st October 2026**.

Special Feature: Technology and Innovation.

Please send any enquiries or articles to the IGDF Office by the above deadline.

In the meantime, if your organisation has any additional stories it would like to

share, it can do so on the new IGDF articles webpage [here](#).

Please supply your articles as a Word file with original images attached as separate jpeg images along with their captions.

Further information can be found on our website at <https://www.igdf.org.uk/>



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