



Seeing blessings of blindness

Robert Baillie of Southern Pines was an active and healthy businessman when he had what should have been routine surgery.

By Melanie Coughlin
Special to OutreachNC

When he came out of surgery, he was blind. Baillie says it took a long time to come to terms with his blindness, but only three years later he has channeled his devastation into helping others. He founded MIRA Foundation USA, the first organization in the country to provide guide dogs free of charge to blind children as young as 11.

“When I became blind, it was a tragedy and it was a blessing,” said Baillie. “The tragedy is that I lost my eyesight. The blessing is that I’m helping children.”

The idea came to Baillie when he was being trained for his guide dog at MIRA Foundation in Canada. There, Baillie met and developed a friendship with its founder Éric St-Pierre.

For weeks, Baillie spent his days learning how to work with his dog and his nights picking St-Pierre’s brain about how he could help blind children.

St-Pierre shared his knowledge freely with Baillie but

—Dog Days of Summer—

Photo by Carrie Frye, OutreachNC

Robert Baillie, who founded MIRA Foundation USA, has turned his own loss of vision into a way to help blind children. Devon, his guide dog, is his constant companion. To learn more about MIRA Foundation USA or to find out how you can help blind children, visit www.mirausa.org or call (910) 944-7757.

said it would be eight to ten years before Baillie could place a dog. Baillie would need a facility in which to train dogs, he’d need experienced trainers, and he’d need several million dollars in the bank.

Determined to help the more than 57,000 blind children in the United States now, Baillie developed a different model for MIRA USA, one that didn’t require millions of dollars or a facility.

Instead, Baillie partnered with MIRA Canada to use existing facilities and trainers. MIRA USA flies children to Canada for the month-long training and pays for the trainers’ subsequent visits to the children’s homes. Structured that way, it costs only \$60,000 to place a dog with a child. Plus, Baillie was able to start placing dogs quickly.

This sense of urgency to move fast came from Baillie’s firsthand experience with his guide dog Devon. A Bernese Mountain dog, Devon brings a freedom to Baillie’s life that he probably would not otherwise have.

When entering or leaving a room, Devon puts his nose to the door handle so Baillie will know where it is. When Baillie is walking, Devon steers Baillie around holes or crevices so he keeps his footing. Devon does it so well that Baillie walks more than three miles from his home to his favorite coffee house every morning.

Now, Baillie is bringing that same freedom to children. In less than two years since its founding, MIRA has given a guide dog to a boy attending Duke University in the fall. This summer, a little girl named Cricket travels to Canada for training with her dog Nippy. At the age of 11, Cricket is the youngest child in the United States to receive a guide dog.

Baillie plans to place dogs with six children next year. That means he needs \$360,000, a daunting goal but one in which Baillie is confident.

“If I can’t get \$60,000 from one person for one dog,” he said, “I’ll get \$1,000 from 60 people.”

It’s that resolve that has made MIRA USA successful in such a short time, but Baillie is humble about his work.

“A lot of people say I’m an inspiration. That’s nice to hear, but it’s not true,” said Baillie. “The kids are the inspiration.”

Volunteers teach students responsible pet ownership

Citizens' Pet Responsibility Committee needs volunteers to help educate students on the importance of responsible pet ownership.

"At first I was very apprehensive," admits Betsy Ficarro, a member of the CPRC. "The committee needed volunteers to teach the program at Robbins Elementary. Barb Ross, Marj Dwyer and I bit the bullet and agreed to do it. Once we got in front of the students and started talking with them, our passion for our pets, and a desire to make sure the next generation takes good care of the pets in their lives, just took over."

Ficarro, Ross and Dwyer comprise just one of several teams of volunteer teachers who presented to all the fourth graders in ten public schools in Moore County this school year.

All the teams were well received and invited back the next school year. The remaining three public schools have been added to the program, bringing the total number of students expected to receive the program this coming school year to around 1,000.

"Our challenge now is to recruit enough volunteer teachers to effectively carry the program to all the schools," states Pam Partis, Co-Chair of the Committee and the person who manages the schedule. "It's a challenge that we welcome," she adds.

"The program was designed to integrate with Moore County Schools' Character Education program, focusing on Good Judgment, Integrity, Kindness, Perseverance, Respect and Responsibility," states Vee Sutherland, who helped craft the content. "We also linked it to the NC Standard Course of Study."

The program consists of five modules focused on making the students aware of their responsibilities towards the animals who share our lives, while also having fun with the topics. For emphasis, guest speakers and their animals are included in the program.

"The guest speakers have been wonderful," says Barb Ross, who contacts the speakers and coordinates the speakers' schedule. A final assembly celebrates all that the students have learned.

Speakers from Moore County Animal Control and The



Photo by Don Hiscott
Volunteer Ursula Walsh with her dogs George, Harry and Sophie.

Animal Center are key carriers of the message that the students can make a difference.

"We let them know that around 5,000 dogs and cats are received by The Animal Center every year," explains Lisa Bridge, Co-Chair of the Committee and an employee of The Animal Center. "Around 3,000 of these animals do not find homes and are euthanized. The students learn that they can help by making sure their pets are wearing identification and by talking to their families about spaying and neutering."

Volunteers are the mainstay of the program.

"Each teacher develops their own style," says Annie Hallinan, a volunteer teacher who took the program to Westmoore Elementary earlier this year. "The materials are all provided."

A two-part training session will be held on July 17 and 24. For more information or to sign up for the training, call Angela Zumwalt at (910) 949-9953.

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