

A DOGS LIFE: MIRA Foundation offers guides for kids

By Sally Lewinski

MIRA Foundation USA, Inc. was established as a non-profit organization in 2008 by Bob and Elaine Baillie after Bob, at age 64 became totally blind as a result of complications from coronary bypass surgery in the Fall of 2007. After a year of struggling to come to terms with his new life, Bob traveled to MIRA Canada where he met his magnificent Bernese Mountain guide dog, Devon.

Devon has had a significant positive impact on Bob, who was astonished to learn that children between the ages of 11-16 in the United States could not get a guide dog. Although there are thirteen accredited agencies providing guide dogs, none of them work with children under the age of 16. Part of the reason has been historical: for many years children who were blind had been institutionalized in convents and state schools where managing forty dogs would not have been practical. Yet, even today, some people believe children are not mature enough to manage a dog.

MIRA USA has formed a close alliance with MIRA Canada in an effort to dispel these beliefs. As a global leader for thirty years in training guide and service dogs, in 1990 MIRA Canada also started, successfully pairing children and dogs, setting a new standard for guide dog organizations. Now MIRA USA can offer children who are blind in the United States the same opportunity, free of charge, to experience all of the benefits a guide dog can offer.

Bob Baillie states that "By working closely with MIRA Canada, we apply stringent guidelines for acceptance into the program for receiving a dog. Since safety of the child is the paramount consideration, a student's level of maturity, orientation and mobility skills are carefully assessed. Even the student's family is evaluated



Cricket Bidleman with Nipi and Bob Baillie with his dog, Devon

in an effort to assure that the family unit can be fully supportive of the dog and child pair. Not all students who apply to the program are immediately accepted. If it is determined that they

are not ready for a dog, they are encouraged to return home and work on whatever skills may need improving so that they can receive a dog at a later date."

In 2010 MIRA USA placed their first two dogs, one with a student in Durham, NC, and one with Cricket Bidleman, an eleven year old girl in the San Diego area. Cricket is the youngest person in the United States to have a guide dog and she and her dog Nipi are thriving. Her own words clearly describe the difference Nipi has made in her life: "Today, I can leave class with my friends instead of needing to leave ahead of everyone else to avoid being knocked down. With Nipi by my side, I am confident that I am safe in a crowd because she is always looking out for me. Now, I am just like everyone else."

The arguments for having a guide dog are many and varied. Not only does the dog provide a second set of eyes, he also becomes a valued companion, providing security and acting as an impressive social bridge to the sighted community.

MIRA USA, recognizes that children who are blind have the same dreams and aspirations as their sighted peers. Their goal is to provide them with a significant opportunity to independently venture out into the greater world where they can make those dreams a reality.

For information contact Beth Daniels ph: 910.944.7757, or email mirafoundationusa@yahoo.com, or visit www.mirausa.org.



Cricket Bidleman with her dog, Nipi



**American Foundation for the Blind (AFB)
Scholarship Program 2011**

AFB administers seven post-secondary education scholarships for up to 11 deserving students who are legally blind. The following is a list of scholarships offered:

DELTA GAMMA MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP - One (1) scholarship of \$1,000

- Undergraduate or graduate study in the field of rehabilitation and/or education of persons who are blind or visually impaired.

FERDINAND TORRES SCHOLARSHIP - One (1) scholarship of \$3,500

- Undergraduate or graduate study in any full-time program in any field.
- Applicant need not be a U.S. citizen, but must reside in U.S. Preference given to New York City metropolitan area residents, and new immigrants to the U.S.

GLADYS C. ANDERSON MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP - One (1) scholarship of \$1,000

- Undergraduate or graduate study in classical or religious music
- Applicant must be female

KAREN D. CARSEL MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP - One (1) scholarship of \$500

- Graduate study in any full-time program in any field.
- Applicant must submit evidence of economic need.

PAUL W. RUCKES SCHOLARSHIP - One (1) scholarship of \$1,000

- Undergraduate or graduate study in engineering or in computer, physical, or life sciences.

R. L. GILLETTE SCHOLARSHIP - Two (2) scholarships of \$1,000 each

- Undergraduate study in a four-year degree program studying literature or music.
- Applicant must be female.

RUDOLPH DILLMAN MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP - Four (4) scholarships of \$2,500 each

- Undergraduate or graduate study in the field of rehabilitation and/or education of persons who are blind or visually impaired.

For additional information please contact:
American Foundation for the Blind Information Center
 Telephone: Toll Free: (800) 232-5463
 E-mail: afbinfo@afb.net
 or visit our web site at www.afb.org/scholarships.asp



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