Janet LaBreck was attending elementary school when she noticed that she didn’t see well at night, and shortly after had issues seeing the blackboard and reading books. It took two years to diagnose her with a rare form of retinitis pigmentosa, which also affected three of her five siblings. She was only ten years old.

Janet was enrolled in Perkins School for the Blind and given opportunities there that were unavailable in public school. “I missed living with my family, but it was the best thing I could have done,” she remembers. In addition to regular studies, orientation and mobility training, and cane travel, at Perkins she discovered her love of music and an affinity for sports that led her to a national track and field record. Janet’s confidence had only begun to soar! One year before graduation she advocated to return home, transitioned back to public school, and graduated with her peers.

Determined to advocate for others who dealt with adversity, financial limitations and disability, Janet earned a Bachelor of Arts in Human Services from University of Boston, a Masters of Education from Springfield College, and an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from the New England College of Optometry, who also dedicated the Janet L. LaBreck Center for Low Vision Rehabilitation in honor of her commitment and leadership in the field of blindness. The center uses the most current technology available to increase independence and employability for its clients.

The first of four guide dogs entered Janet’s life when, after twenty years advocating for those with disabilities, Janet was rewarded with her appointment as Commissioner of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. While there she established a summer internship program that placed legally blind applicants in positions that prepared them for the workplace, and this innovative program has been adopted across the country.

Nominated by President Barrack Obama and confirmed by the United States Senate, in 2013 Janet became the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration within the United States Department of Education. She oversaw a multi-billion dollar budget and formed partnerships that led to the modernization of vocational rehabilitation regulations.

When finishing up as a commissioner in Washington, Janet’s second guide was getting older. She decided not to get another guide as her family was moving to Georgia. Around that time she started a consulting practice where she could continue the work she had been doing in the Obama administration and take advantage of the opportunity to be self-employed. With two like-minded colleagues she formed Synergy Consulting Partners LLC. They partner with state agencies, the disability community, universities, non-profits, and the business community in managing federal and other resources in a way that promotes innovative, organizational, cultural and fiscal agility. This leads to more meaningful and sustainable outcomes for the disability community.

Knowing once again that her work would involve travel, Janet reached out to Freedom Guide Dogs and received Bob, a bouvier des Flanders, as her new guide.

“I am in love with Bob!” Janet said. “He is so sweet and very gentle. He’s a bit shy and with encouragement he’s coming out of his shell. He loves people and is very focused when working. We’re going to start traveling together this month (April)!”

Janet’s story is full of self-determination and achievement. “Education enables those with disabilities to become independent and confident, which leads to success,” she shares. “In national presentations I say ‘sometimes in life adversity and barriers become a pathway to opportunity.’ I believe strongly in helping others and find it fulfilling. I hope to continue to provide inspiration and confidence for others and there is still a great need. It makes me happy to be able to give back.”
Thirty years seems like a long time, but it passes quickly when amazing things are happening!

In 1992, Sharon and Eric Loori founded Freedom Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc. on four acres of quiet land in upstate New York. They recognized the need for alternatives to what other guide dog schools were offering and began working with Labrador retrievers and developing their own breeding program.

Over the years there were many changes. A new kennel was built, followed by a puppy enrichment center. Freedom’s Hometown Training program, allowing a client to be trained with their new guide dog in their own community, became attractive to those who couldn’t travel for three to four weeks of training. A need was identified for those with visual impairment who also had secondary disabilities and the Looris found ways to bridge that gap through altering techniques, harnesses and finding adaptive equipment.

As the decades sped by, the gentle, accepting Labrador guide dog stock was supplemented with other breeds, most recently Barrets for those with allergies. Currently Freedom is breeding smooth coated collies, Labrador/smooth coated collie crosses known as “Lollies,” the affable, good spirited Labrador, and the bouvier des Flanders, which is suitable for those who have allergies.

Puppy raising has expanded from New York state and is now being done in several states along the east coast, including New Hampshire, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, Virginia, and Florida.

Freedom has been blessed with an amazing group of trainers, office and grounds staff, volunteers, and donors. Everyone is an integral part of the fulfillment of Freedom’s mission.

In 2019 the Looris moved to Florida, where Eric is now training and placing Freedom’s guide dogs in the southeastern states. As Executive Director he is actively involved in daily operations and planning for Freedom’s exciting future. The New York campus remains Freedom’s primary location.

Freedom Guide Dogs excitedly looks forward to what the future will bring. Cheers to 30 years of milestones and the promise of 30 more! ♥

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Ashleigh@freedomguidedogs.org
Gary and I were fortunate to become Bob’s Puppy Raisers in January of 2020. When we first got the phone call asking us if we would like to raise a bouvier des Flanders pup I asked, “A what?” Bob came from a breeder that donated him to Freedom so he was close to a year old when we got him.

Bob was very curious about everything and noticed everything. He remembered where the rabbit or squirrel was the day before on our two mile walk around town. We would laugh and say, “There’s the French Cattle Dog doing his job!!” He was very polite around people and we found that he was extra calm when he saw a child. Bob loved the hugs he got from the children next door. He played gently with our cat and enjoyed watching the neighbor’s chickens when they came over to visit.

“Thanks” to COVID, we didn’t get Bob out in public places often. He did become a “Movie Star” with my Kindergarten Kids when school switched to remote learning. I think Bob helped with their focus because they never knew when he would step into view. I even had a mom recognize me in a store a year later and she asked me how Bob was doing!

I have had the pleasure of raising over 20 Guide Dog Pups over the years. My grandkids are raising a pup right now. We have so many fond memories of all our pups. When we receive the picture of our pup and its new handler I get goosebumps and happy tears come to my eyes. It is a “proud mom” moment. We have so many wonderful memories of Bob and we are so proud of him!!

Editor’s note: Article written by Karen Knight. Many thanks to you and all of our amazing puppy raisers!
Freedom puppy Comet is a celebrity! We are excited to have partnered with the Utica Comets hockey team, where Comet has been regularly attending games and having great training experiences.

Frequently collaborating with other guide and service dog schools, we’re happy to announce that Freedom pup Kismet has been gifted to BluePath Service Dogs, where he will become a proud autism service dog, while Yoshi and one of his siblings are the newest pups to enter our collaboration with Japan Guide Dog Association. Bred for success at Freedom, we know they’ll excel!

In 30 years Freedom Guide dogs has placed over 500 impeccably trained guide dogs with the blind and visually impaired in 27 states.

The need for guide dogs is never ending, as is Freedom’s mission to fulfill that need. Looking forward, we can see our dogs happily working with new clients and stepping in for guide dogs who retire for another 30 years.

Including Freedom Guide Dogs in your will or estate planning ensures that your support of our work continues into perpetuity. Personal donations, funds from your employer’s charitable foundation, employee matching funds programs, appreciated stocks and bonds, or bequeaths from your estate can be sent directly to Freedom or to the Freedom Guide Dogs Charitable Fund at the Community Foundation.

Please contact our office at info@freedomguidedogs.org for information regarding which option is best for you.

We are so grateful for the support that we continue to receive from our extended Freedom family. The road to independence is not one traveled alone! Your enthusiasm and generosity keeps us moving forward, fulfilling the mission to help everyone who needs our guide dogs.

Thank you…..

What does the future hold?