



# UPDATE

LEADERDOG.ORG | ISSUE 1 | 2026

LEADER DOGS FOR THE BLIND



## Finding and Building Community

The Power of One Puppy: Carolyn's Story

Connection Without Boundaries

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear LDB Community,

**A**t Leader Dogs for the Blind, community is the heartbeat of our mission. From our Rochester Hills campus, it extends both nationwide and internationally through our clients and supporters. This May issue of Update celebrates the many

ways that bring people to Leader Dog and, just as importantly, find friendship and connection once they arrive. We are honored that your path led you to Leader Dog.

For many of our clients, the journey begins with a search for independence and grows into something deeper, with lifelong friendships formed, affinity and a sense of belonging. Whether through friendships created during on-campus training, conversations with fellow graduates, or through ongoing connections in communities around the country, these relationships offer encouragement, understanding and shared strength. This year we are proud to launch our first alumni board with

representation from all Leader Dog programs and a powerful way for clients to support each other.

That same sense of connection is felt by our 1,440 volunteers who serve as puppy raisers, breeding hosts and on-campus support. From local puppy raising groups, breeding host mentors and campus events to interactions sparked through Facebook and Instagram, these communities provide support, friendship and reassurance. They remind us that every contribution matters, and we are stronger together.

What makes the Leader Dog community so special is how we support each other along the way. In moments of challenge, celebration, learning, and growth, our community offers comfort and connection. There is a place for you here at Leader Dog, and I personally invite you to become involved.

As you read this issue, I hope you see your own story reflected in these pages. Thank you for being part of the Leader Dog story as we uplift, connect, and advocate for people who are blind or have low vision together.

Forward,

Melissa Weisse  
President & CEO



## MISSION MOMENT

*"I was surprised how quickly we started working well together. I was not a dog person. Now, I can't imagine my life without Leader Dog Chance. He is the perfect match for me."*

*~Angela H. & LD CHANCE*



# From One Search to a Lifelong Connection



## CLIENT SPOTLIGHT

For Morgan Estes, finding community started with a Google search for summer camps for blind teens. She discovered Leader Dogs for the Blind—with a big draw being the chance to walk with a guide dog. “When I heard I got to walk with a guide dog, I was like, this is the camp for me!”

At 16, Morgan began her journey in Leader Dog’s Teen Orientation & Mobility (O&M) program, where she built confidence in her cane skills and independent travel. She returned the following week for Teen Summer Camp in 2022, and again as a camp counselor in 2023, forming friendships and finding connections along the way.

“I first felt a sense of community when I went to summer camp for the first time... we took a group picture and created a group chat,” she said.

That sense of belonging kept her coming back. “Everyone at Leader Dog was so kind and welcoming... they met me where I was at,” she said.

In 2025, Morgan returned to Leader Dog to be paired with her guide dog, Ivan. Together, they continue to grow as a team. “We can be silly and goofy when he’s not working, but when his harness is on, he’s on his A game,” Morgan explained.

Looking ahead, Morgan plans to stay involved with Leader Dog after graduation and speak to Lions clubs in Maryland to raise awareness.

For Morgan, the Leader Dog community is simple: “Incredibly awesome people who really care about making sure you feel welcome.”



MORGAN WITH LD IVAN (TOP)  
TEEN O&M (MIDDLE) AND TEEN  
SUMMER CAMP 2022 (BOTTOM)



## LETTERS TO LEADER DOG

*What's your favorite memory from training?*



”

The people! Definitely the people. Some of my closest friends, I met at Leader dog! And I love remembering all of the laughs we shared there!

Charity R.



”

I have so many wonderful memories. One of my favorites is when I was training with Hope in 2016. Hope's puppy raisers traveled from Illinois to meet me and see Hope. When we were introduced, we clicked, and the hour went by too fast. Hope looked like she was in heaven. When the time was up, The puppy raisers looked on with such pride. They were proud of Hope the sweet girl.

Elizabeth U. and LD HOPE

”

It's all about the people! My classmates, instructors and the amazing folks from Leader Dog made my experience unforgettable. I was there for my third dog, and I think I've made friends for life and just truly enjoyed every moment, even the early 6AM mornings in -10°.

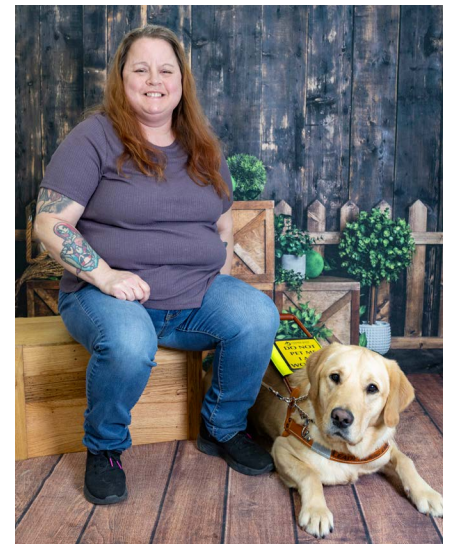
Bob H. and LD NICKO



”

Sighted people being the minority... there was something extremely freeing about being around a group of other blind and visually impaired people for the first time... but right beside the excellent food and warm staff!

Justin W.



”

Definitely hard to pinpoint one thing because my whole experience was nothing short of wonderful. I met wonderful people and the staff love their jobs and it shows. Everyone was kind and very helpful.

Jessica B. and LD LEO

”

It was all great. The people were awesome. The other clients were great. The food was amazing and I really enjoyed going to the gym. One of my favorite memories was when I went downtown and had to find the facility on my own. That gave me so much confidence. I also really enjoyed my first Juno walk with a golden retriever named Roscoe. It's such a great organization.

Ashley T.



”

So many memories, but the best memories are meeting all of my classmates—connecting with them, and my instructors. It's such a wonderful organization and I'm proud and honored to be a Leader Dog graduate.

Doug M. and LD TONKS



What began as a simple decision to raise one puppy quickly grew into a lifelong commitment to support something truly transformative. That's exactly what happened when Carolyn Crowe first became involved with Leader Dogs for the Blind.

Carolyn thought she would raise one puppy and move on—but after raising one she said, “I was hooked. I soon learned what a wonderful organization Leader Dog was and how they help people live independent lives.”

Currently raising her 37th puppy, Carolyn finds it incredibly rewarding to watch each puppy grow from a small, dependent bundle of energy into a confident, capable guide dog. However, Carolyn has come to understand that the heart of a puppy raiser's journey isn't just about the dogs—it's about the people whose lives are transformed by them.

Carolyn brings a deeply personal perspective to her volunteerism. After experiencing vision loss in one eye following a brain aneurysm, her connection to the Leader Dog mission became even more profound. “Losing my own vision has given me a deeper understanding of some of the emotions the clients might experience. I am grateful for my remaining vision so that I can continue to raise more puppies for Leader Dog.” Not only that—her connection to the community grew stronger when Carolyn was homebound for several months. With no family around, friends she met through Leader Dog helped her care for her dogs and continue to progress with everyday tasks.

Volunteers like Carolyn give their time, energy, and love to Future Leader Dogs, and it's this shared experience that creates a deep and lasting bond within the puppy raising community. It is a network built on compassion, strengthened by the support of Leader Dog team members who share the same commitment to empowering individuals who are blind or have low vision through safe, independent travel.

For Carolyn, being part of the Leader Dog community is more than volunteering, it is an opportunity to make a lasting impact on someone's life.



CAROLYN WITH FLD DEVIN (TOP)  
TALKING TO GUESTS AT DINNER  
IN THE DARK (MIDDLE) WITH  
FELLOW PUPPY RAISERS AT  
PUPPY BOWL 2026 (BOTTOM)

Learn more about puppy raising or other opportunities at [LeaderDog.org/volunteer](https://LeaderDog.org/volunteer).



From ziplining and kayaking to spraying a fire hose and dancing the night away, Teen Summer Camp at Leader Dogs for the Blind is packed with unforgettable fun and newfound independence.



Held each June on Leader Dog’s campus in Rochester Hills, this weeklong experience is designed for 16- and 17-year-olds who are blind or low vision. For many campers, it’s something entirely new. Some are traveling independently for the first time—most arriving by plane. Many are used to being the only student with vision loss in their school.

At camp, that all changes.

### A Place to Belong

Teen Summer Camp offers a safe, welcoming space where campers can connect with peers who share similar experiences, relax and be themselves.

“Getting to be around people like you that share your interests and are also visually impaired is very rewarding,” shared camper Kyden D. “You get a chance to make friends with people that understand you.”

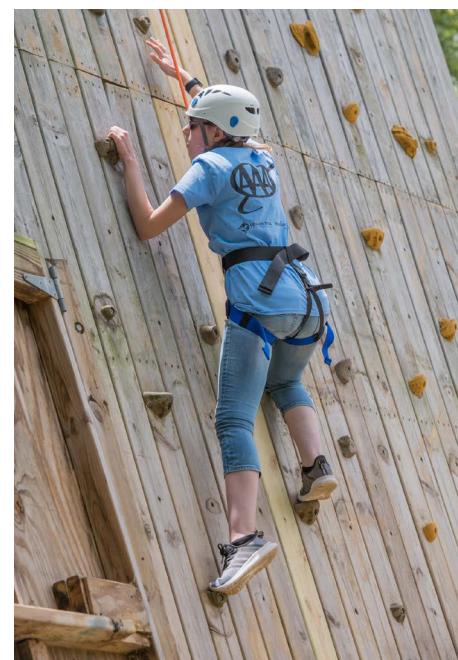
That sense of belonging is powerful. The teens quickly begin to open up, forming friendships and building confidence that lasts long after camp. They are encouraged to support one another, step into leadership roles and ensure everyone feels included. Returning campers can apply to take on added responsibility as junior or senior counselors, helping guide activities and mentor others.

### Fun With Purpose

While every day of camp is filled with energy and excitement, each activity is also designed to integrate learning opportunities whenever possible.

Campers spend their first day at Lions Bear Lake Camp, taking on a rock wall, ziplining and kayaking—classic camp experiences that encourage exploration and confidence. Throughout the week, they’re introduced to tools like the Stellar Trek GPS device, learning how to navigate, identify landmarks and better understand their surroundings.

There are also unforgettable outings, like a visit to the Troy Fire Station, where campers try on gear, ride in a fire truck and experience the world in new, hands-on ways. A trip to the Detroit Zoo blends fun with GPS navigation skills, while a movie theater visit introduces many campers to audio description for the first time. One evening, the teens practice night travel in downtown Rochester under the supervision of Leader Dog team members.



Hannah Jones, a certified orientation and mobility specialist (COMS) in our extended services department, reflects on the collective impact of the staff and volunteers who make these experiences possible. “We strive to create a safe, comfortable, and welcoming space,” she explains. “It’s a lot of preparation—but it’s worth it when I see them smiling and laughing.”

### **A Day They’ll Never Forget**

For many campers, one experience stands above the rest: Dog Day.

Campers spend the day with guide dog mobility instructors, meeting and working with Leader Dogs in training. They learn what it’s like to live and travel with a guide dog—loose leash heeling, grooming, and even practicing a route together.

For some, it’s simply a joyful experience. For others, it’s a glimpse into what their future could hold.

### **Ending on a High Note**

By the final night, the transformation is clear. Campers take the stage for a talent show, cheering each other on as they share songs, performances and talents. They celebrate their new friendships and make plans to keep in touch.

After camp, Tracy, the parent of a teen camper, noticed something different in her daughter—a quiet but powerful shift toward confidence and growth. “She felt comforted knowing she’s not alone and encouraged by the realization that she can navigate life beyond home. It truly strengthened her confidence.”

For Teen Summer Camp alumni, what begins as a step outside their comfort zone becomes something much more: a place where they feel confident, connected and understood.



If you are enjoying this issue and would like to support Leader Dog, you can make an online donation and make even more people unstoppable TODAY by clicking below.

[DONATE NOW](#)



A camper enjoys the Detroit Zoo during Teen Summer Camp 2026.

## FIGHT FLEAS AND TICKS WITH TEVRA BRANDS

As the official flea and tick sponsor of Leader Dogs for the Blind, Tevra Brands is here to remind you that May means flea and tick season is in full swing—and protecting your dog doesn't have to break the bank.

This partnership is more than a corporate sponsorship. It started because one of Tevra's own employees is a guide dog handler who relies on their products every day to keep their working partner safe. That personal connection drives everything about the relationship between Tevra Brands and Leader Dog, and it's why Tevra provides flea and tick protection throughout every phase of the Leader Dog life cycle—from puppyhood all the way through a dog's working career.



This season, we'd like to spotlight **Vetality® Avantect™ II** for Dogs, a fast-acting topical treatment providing 30 days of protection. Avantect™ II doesn't just kill fleas, ticks and mosquitoes—It repels them on contact, which means these pests don't have to bite your dog in order to die.

As a member of the Leader Dog community, you're entitled to a **25% discount** on any Tevra Brands product. Simply visit **tevrabrands.com** and enter the code **"LEADER25"** at checkout.

Tevra Brands is proud to stand alongside Leader Dogs for the Blind, offering numerous products including not only flea and tick, but health and wellness, dental and more! If you have questions about Tevra Brands products or if you have accessibility issues with their website, their customer service team is happy to help at 844.276.3290 or [info@tevrabrands.com](mailto:info@tevrabrands.com).



Article provided by Tevra Brands

## SIMPLE WAYS TO MAKE A BIG IMPACT



Leaving a donation to Leader Dogs for the Blind in your will or trust is a simple but impactful way to support the work we do and ensure our future. Another way to make a lasting difference is to designate Leader Dog as a beneficiary of your retirement plan, IRA, life insurance or donor-advised fund.

To find out more about donating these types of assets or joining our Legacy Society, please contact Amy Bush, director of planned giving, at 248.650.7108 or [Amy.Bush@leaderdog.org](mailto:Amy.Bush@leaderdog.org).

### NEW LEGACY SOCIETY MEMBERS

Anonymous (5)

Bob Allred - Guiding Futures Fund



You are invited to join the  
LEADER DOGS FOR THE BLIND  
LEGACY SOCIETY

# You, Leader Dog, and Thrivent A Partnership in Action



DONOR HIGHLIGHT

Leader Dog celebrated its tenth year as a Thrivent Choice® grant recipient, having received over \$400,000 in Choice Dollars® grants from Thrivent Charitable™ (formerly the Thrivent Financial Lutherans Foundation). These grants are the direct result of the Thrivent Member Network, which includes Leader Dog clients, team members, volunteers, donors and friends we have yet to meet, expressing their support through the Choice Dollars, both monthly and annually.

Based in Appleton, Wisconsin, Thrivent® began more than 120 years ago with small, life-changing investments made by community members. Today, throughout the Midwest and nation, Thrivent is a Fortune 500 company and in 2026 marked its 15th year as an Ethisphere World's Most Ethical Company™. Leader Dog is proud to have received Choice Dollars from members represented across the country by 49 different advisors and more than 20 member networks. With this support, including a \$100,000 grant in 2016 from a ten-year celebration of giving by the Thrivent Foundation."

Members generate input for Choice Dollars through their banking, investment and insurance products throughout the year. If you would like to learn more about Leader Dog's relationship with Thrivent and how you can direct your current or future Choice Dollars to Leader Dog, please visit [LeaderDog.org/thrivent-and-leader-dog](http://LeaderDog.org/thrivent-and-leader-dog).

Thrivent Members who would like to direct a gift to Leader Dog from their personal or family donor advised fund (DAF) or annuities can contact Kathryn Tuck, at [ktuck@leaderdog.org](mailto:ktuck@leaderdog.org) or 248.218.6431. We are happy to discuss with you where your family fund's gift can best be used to support our mission.

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New Thrivent Choice Dollars began **April 1!**



**Scan the code** to learn more about Thrivent Choice and how you can financially support our organization.



## CONNECTION WITHOUT BOUNDARIES

For many people, community is tied to a geographic place—a shared space where connection happens. But for Leader Dog clients, connection doesn't depend on location. It's something that can be built and nurtured from anywhere.

Two virtual groups are helping clients find that sense of belonging, offering meaningful ways to connect with others who share similar experiences. These online communities offer clients the opportunity to ask questions, receive support and recognize milestones along the journey with vision loss.

Leader Dog's monthly peer support calls, held via Zoom, bring together 50–60 clients from across the country. Facilitated by Krista Oliver, client support and wellness specialist and a Leader Dog client herself, these sessions are intentionally client-led. With support from fellow clients and volunteers Joey Johnson and Walker Jones, the calls create space for open conversation and shared learning.

"Many Leader Dog alumni are the only person in their town who is blind or low vision, which can feel isolating," Krista says. "Having an opportunity each month to share experiences and hear from others helps us feel less alone, more seen and understood. It also builds confidence as we exchange ideas and resources."

For clients like Ann Marie W., that shared space offers both practical guidance and reassurance. "In the peer support group, I've learned that we all face challenges in different ways and don't always have the same access to resources," she says. "So many of my questions—what to expect, how to do things—have been answered through others' experiences, tips and ideas. It's helped me in my daily life as my vision changes and reminds me that we're not alone in this journey."

The virtual client community continues between calls in a private Facebook group for clients and alumni. Here, connections happen every day—whether someone is preparing for class, reflecting on their experience or seeking advice.

Client Cynthia N. joined the Facebook group as she was preparing to join the guide dog program and found exactly what she was looking for. "The Leader Dog alumni Facebook group has given me a true sense of community," she says. "It's connected me with people who understand this journey, and I've learned so much from the challenges and solutions others share."

Together, these spaces ensure that no matter where clients call home, they are never navigating their journey alone.



### VIRTUAL SUPPORTER CALLS FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Leader Dog also hosts bi-monthly virtual groups for family members, friends and loved ones. Co-facilitated by Ronita Szczotka, volunteer and the daughter of a Leader Dog client, and Krista Oliver, these sessions provide a welcoming space to learn, ask questions and connect with others who are supporting someone with vision loss.

To register, fill out the form online --- ►



# A Vision of Service: Lions National Impact



*IN EVERY LEADER DOG LIES THE HEART OF A LION—A Leader Dog partner since 1939.*

Leader Dogs for the Blind is proud to continue our Lions legacy with the support of clubs across North America and beyond. For generations, Lions clubs have been unwavering partners in advancing our mission to help provide life-changing services to individuals who are blind or low-vision.

Among the many clubs who support our mission, the Magic City Lions Club of Minot, North Dakota stands out as a dedicated champion. “The Magic City Lions are proud to support Leader Dogs for the Blind because their mission reflects the heart of Lionism: helping people gain independence, confidence, and opportunity. The organization is especially meaningful to our club because it’s close to home, impacting our own friends and neighbors. For more than two decades, our club has been honored to contribute to this life-changing work and to support the blind and low-vision community. We’re grateful to be part of a global network of Lions helping make mobility and independence possible.”



Equally inspiring is the Missoula Lions Club of Montana. Since 1945, their annual Christmas tree sale has grown into a cherished tradition that fuels their charitable giving. With just 25 members, their impact is remarkable—supporting accessible vision care in their community while also championing Leader Dogs for the Blind. Their dedication helps empower individuals to achieve independence and live with confidence.

These clubs exemplify the enduring spirit of Lionism: service, generosity, and community. Their continued support ensures that Leader Dogs for the Blind can expand our reach and change more lives.





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FOR THE BLIND®

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Leader Dogs for the Blind  
**BARK &  
BREW 5K**

presented by Chief Financial Credit Union



**SUNDAY, JUNE 7 | 9AM**  
**DOWNTOWN ROCHESTER**

Kick off your summer with Leader Dogs for the Blind's **Bark & Brew 5K**, presented by Chief Financial Credit Union! Every participant will score a paw-some shirt, a shiny medal, a coupon for an age-appropriate drink and a tasty treat at our post-race celebration.

Join us after at Rochester Mills Beer Company—with DJ Mike keeping the energy high, it's the perfect setting to relax, connect with fellow participants, and celebrate your achievement.

For additional information on **Bark & Brew** or other events, visit [LeaderDog.org/events](http://LeaderDog.org/events). For quick access to register, scan the QR code.

