Birch Sugar...What is it?

Birch sugar, an artificial sweetener that can be poisonous for dogs otherwise known as Xylitol or wood sugar. It is found in household goods - sugar free gum, breath mints, vitamin supplements, and many others but most frequent for dogs, some brands of peanut butter. Make sure to read the labels on products. A good reminder for this spooky season of Halloween!

**Please consult your veterinarian if you have questions or your dog ingested birch sugar**
In the 2021 first quarter newsletter, we shared Dennis Walker’s backstory – how OccuPaws’ lead GDMI, became a guide dog instructor, and what drew him to this most unique of professions. Recently, we talked with Dennis about how he evaluates the readiness of visually impaired persons to accept a guide dog, how he matches a dog to a person and how he conducts initial training with a blind person.

Dennis’ answers reveal that his work is as much an art as a science. Each visually impaired person is different, with distinct capabilities and resources and needs. And each dog is different. The dogs may have undergone uniform training, but they present unique personalities which influences which person they might best be paired with. The in-home training is not a predetermined sequence of steps, but is nuanced according to ... well, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. First, let’s talk about the person who gets a guide dog.

First, Dennis says, the person must be legally blind. Second, the person has to be able to travel independently. By this, Dennis doesn’t mean they have to be capable of jetting off to distant locations (though they might), but they have to be able to leave their home and walk somewhere, such as around the block or to a store or to board a train or to navigate their way to work.

Dennis noted “A number of times, I have stopped someone on the street walking with a cane. I would ask if they had thought about getting a guide dog. Sometimes they have answered they didn’t think they were qualified, and I’ve told them ‘You’re blind and functioning independently - crossing streets, getting on a bus - so you are qualified.” Having established that the person is legally blind and capable of travel, Dennis visits the home to evaluate the person’s ability to provide a good environment for the dog. Having a dog costs money, so finance is important. Can they afford to feed and pay for the dog? Another consideration is that some people don’t want fur in their house, or they don’t want to have to pick up poop or do routine grooming of the dog. Most potential clients pass this home visit, but sometimes issues are exposed which indicate the person is not a good match for a guide dog. As Dennis says, “Walking into somebody’s home, you can tell a lot about who they are and how they function.”
Matching a dog to an owner is largely a question of the dog’s pace, the speed the dog walks, the dog’s energy level, how far the dog can walk, and its strength. Then there is the issue of the dog’s personality. “If we can, we like to match up personalities. A friendly outgoing dog is best matched with a friendly outgoing person.”

In-home training usually lasts 10–12 days. “I did one in the spring that was two weeks. If we can’t get it right in two weeks, it’s probably never going to work.”

What does a day of training look like? On the first day, Dennis shows up with notepad and a pen and scratches out a basic outline. He lets the client pick the start time each day, anywhere from 6 to 10 am. In the morning, they have a discussion for 1–2 hours then they go for a walk, which can take another 1–2 hours. They take a big break in middle of day. Both the dog and the client need downtime to process what they have learned. “I want the dog to go to sleep, to chase rabbits in a dream.” In the afternoon, Dennis and the client have another discussion, reviewing what is going well and what needs work. Then they go for another walk. Some days, they go on what Dennis calls a ‘field trip’ – to a restaurant or shopping or a train or bus ride. Occasionally there is an evening session, but it all depends. Dennis says he can just tell when the dog is done for the day, or the person. Pushing too hard can be counterproductive.

OccuPaws success depends on artists like Dennis Walker. He has a talent for applying the media of a guide dog to the canvas of a visually impaired person’s life. And for that, we are all grateful.

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**Raise a Puppy**

The puppies rotate about every 4 months which allows puppy raisers to continue to fall in love over and over again. This allows the pups exposure to many different households. Puppy sitters are also needed for shorter time frames. Tell us what age of puppy would fit best in your household!

**Volunteer**

Do you enjoy playing with puppies? Have administrative talents? Are great at organizing events? Have a passion for graphic design? All of these talents (and many, many more) are needed!

**Donate**

We are always seeking support financially, or with donations of items needed. We could take items for raffle prizes, dog related items such as crates, toys, etc. or even items to help with our breeding program!

**Events**

See our upcoming events via our Facebook page or on the last page of this newsletter where you can see our dogs in training and our fundraising events!
Jet Guides Michael Mayer’s Independence

A BONDED PAIR

Where do you live and describe your neighborhood:
I live in Monroe WI, a city of about 10,000 people. I live in town in a residential area across from a park.

Tell us about yourself: I work as an Automotive Service Advisor at a small automotive shop. I work in an office and mostly on the computer and phone. I am married. My wife Tara and I have 2 boys, Damian (9) and Dylan (4). Tara also has a daughter from her first marriage, Maisie (15). I like to go camping/boating/kayaking and pretty much anything outdoors. I like to travel with my family.

Tell us about your Guide Dog: Jet is now a 3 year old black lab. He weighs about 80 lbs. He is a very calm dog and does very well guiding me wherever I go. He listens well and fits in just about anywhere. He is very loved by my friends and family and gets lots of attention. He also lives with another lab, Rudy and a cat Leah. He gets along well with these friends.

Is this your first OccuPaws Guide Dog?: Yes

How has your OccuPaws guide dog changed your life?: Jet has helped me become more independent. He helps me walk to and from work, without worrying so much about obstacles and falling. As lighting plays a big part of what I can see, he helps me when I go in and out of buildings to not run into things. Jet has also made my wife Tara feel more at ease with me walking and he really helps her when we go places with the kids. She used to have to lead me and keep track of the kids. Now Jet can help me more.

What is something unusual that you have done with your guide dog?: Jet has been canoeing, although he wasn't a fan. He recently rode a train at an amusement park and this he liked much better!

How did you learn about OccuPaws and what has your experience with OccuPaws been like?: I learned about OccuPaws by seeing them at events, such as the Milwaukee Vision walk.

Any advice or comments for our volunteer raisers and sitters?: It is amazing what the puppy raisers do for these dogs. It helps a lot to have general obedience training so that when it comes time to guide train the dogs are well behaved and will listen.

Do you have any advice for people seeking a guide dog?: I would say to do your research and ask lots of questions. One of the things I love about OccuPaws is that they train the dog with you where you live and work. Not all guide dog schools do that.

Any other comments, concerns or success stories you would like to share?: Jet has changed my life for the better and I love having more freedom thanks to OccuPaws.
I have been in prison a very long time and it is about time for me to move on to a new adventure at a lower security institution so I can begin my transition home! Sadly, this means that I have to leave my work with OccuPaws and my current puppy, Xander. I would like to take a moment to reflect on my experience with OccuPaws and the wonderful puppies I have had the honor of working with.

My cellmate of 8 years and I began volunteering to be puppy raisers in January of 2020 and I have learned so much about myself, my teammate, and about the important work these great dogs do for those in the community. Currently, I am on my fourth dog and love being in the program as much as when we got our first puppy, Piper.

When I began in the program, I knew that my life would change a lot, but I learned quickly that every part of my life would be different. In prison you lose so much of what would be a normal life including structure, purpose, and even a sense of responsibility. Having these puppies gives all that back—and quickly! All of a sudden you have a huge responsibility in front of you with many people counting on you to do a good job (especially the clients). My whole day revolves around this little ball of fur and love with the training, feeding, grooming, exercising, socializing, paperwork, reading, healthcare, potties, playtimes, cleaning of the room and equipment, and all the thousand other little things that go into making these dogs the best we can.

Besides giving me a feeling of purpose, this program has also helped me on a deeply personal level. My whole life I have suffered from social anxiety disorder and it has caused me to be a very quiet and shy person—I’ve always preferred to be the person in back, hoping that no one would notice me.

Having these dogs has forced me out of my comfort zone and helped me to be more comfortable around other people. At first, I was very nervous about our group training sessions but over time I was excited about going and participating by asking questions or demonstrating my dog’s skills in front of the team (something I could never have done before). And even on the unit, I find myself more confident and comfortable working with my teammates or answering questions from other inmates and staff about our work and training. Being less anxious around other people has helped me to be a more positive person myself, something that will help me greatly when I go home.

Through the numerous OccuPaws sessions, I have learned just how important these dogs are to a blind person. It is a great feeling that I was trusted enough by this organization and institution staff to be able to be a part of such a critical part in these dogs training to be a great guide dog for the blind. Because of how positive this experience has been, I would like to continue to volunteer with some sort of similar organization once I am released to my home in Michigan even if I can’t necessarily be a puppy raiser again. To conclude, I would like to thank Barb, Lois, John, Coleman, Ms. Fladhammer, Ms. Earle, Ms. Muller, Ms. Cordero, Correctional Officer Reeseman, and all the other volunteers, donors, and institution staff who helped make it possible for me to be in this program. I wish this organization, this program, and all my puppies (Piper, Sansa, Simba, and Xander) all the success in the world. Thank you.