With support from NDIS and Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, Donna stays positive through difficult journey

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Donna Purcell beams as she cuddles 7-week-old black Labrador puppy Dora, who will soon embark on an 18-month training program to become a Guide Dog.

It’s a bittersweet experience for Donna, who is mourning the loss of her own faithful Guide Dog, Dora, who lost her battle with Lymphoma last year.

Young puppy Dora has been named in memory of Donna’s Dora – also a black Labrador – who safely guided Donna through Sydney’s busy streets and around the country for 5 years.

“The relationship with your Guide Dog is special and the bond is unique because you really have to trust that dog with your life,” Donna says.

“Dora was the perfect Guide Dog. When she was working, she was not distracted by anyone or anything. She was always focused on me and keeping me safe.

“She was very special and there’s just this deep sense of loss in your stomach and in your heart."

As a blind woman, Donna has spent much of her life navigating her way through challenges.

After growing up in Broken Hill with little support for vision loss, Donna left home at 15 and worked her way up to senior executive roles.

Today, she’s a leader in designing and developing strategies for inclusive and accessible workplaces and communities in Australia.

Donna holds key roles at the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) as Disability Champion and Participant Advocate and is a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participant herself.

But having overcome countless obstacles to be where she is today, Donna now faces one of her greatest challenges yet.

Seven months after losing Dora, Donna is waiting to be matched with a new Guide Dog.

On International Guide Dog Day, she is sharing her difficult journey to help raise awareness.

“I think this is an important educational story. Part of being a participant in the NDIS is that not all journeys go as planned and some don’t have happy endings,” Donna says.

“In my case, both the NDIS and Guide Dogs NSW/ACT provided tremendous support through that journey of Dora’s treatment. While it did not go as we hoped, it is part of the day-to-day life for a person with disability, or for all of us really. Dogs, like humans, get sick and life’s circumstances change. A dog passes away or has to retire suddenly.

“And while Guide Dogs NSW/ACT is doing all they can to match me with a new dog, it’s not about finding any dog, it’s about finding the right dog.

“I travel a lot for my work, so my dog must be comfortable with a lot of travel and small enough to get on planes. Not all dog personalities are going to match that.”

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT’s Guide Dog Mobility Instructor Doug Ritchie says matching Guide Dogs with users is complex.

“Every partnership is built on trust, companionship, and a strong connection. We carefully match someone like Donna with a Guide Dog based on personality, mobility needs and lifestyle. It’s a considered and important process; it’s essential a Handler and their dog share a powerful bond.”

This year’s theme for International Guide Dog Day is ‘Talk to the Handler’.

“A working Guide Dog in harness can go anywhere with their Handler, it’s a legal right,” Doug says. “It’s important to give them access, and not to distract a working Guide Dog so they can focus on their skilled work.”

As the search for Donna’s ‘perfect match’ continues, she says she keenly feels Dora’s loss.

But it’s not just heartache Donna is dealing with – it’s also her loss of independence.

“It’s incredible how big a gap not having a dog has left,” she says. “I’m using a cane to move around Sydney’s CBD and it’s something I’ve never had to do before. Navigating through Central Station is a nightmare. I’m relying on my husband and other people a lot more for help now.”

Donna remains positive and hopeful for the future. She’s been enjoying time with new Guide Dog puppies, raised by Leanne who also raised Dora.

“Leanne went through that journey with me of losing Dora and was with me when she passed away, but she has now brought a new Dora into the world, which is a beautiful full circle moment,” Donna says.

“While Dora number 2 won’t be my new dog, in about a year and a half, hopefully she’ll be a beautiful little guide for someone else. And I’m hopeful the right dog for me is not far away.”

Click on the link for more information about International Guide Dog Day 2023 .

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