

MAX'S DAILY DIARY

DAY 1 "WHERE'S MAX?"

Something I could have done well without was to find myself wide awake at 5a.m.! It was pointless trying to get back to sleep, I was awake, and that was that. I went downstairs and began getting some of my things together, which is typical of our family, leaving everything until the last minute!

I decided that Eddy's final harness walk would coincide with Su's appointment at the Doctor's. Eddy and I headed for the Coffee Shop in town so that I could have a bacon buttie and a mug of tea. Su would then meet us there once her appointment was over, have a mug of tea herself, and then we'd head back home to get everything in the car ready to head off! For some reason, today of all days, about four ladies decided they wanted an in-depth discussion of Eddy! "How old is he? How old are guide dogs when they retire? What happens to them when they retire? When was Eddy retiring? Where would he be going? Was I having another dog?" And so on. This delayed our getting home, but Eddy and the ladies thoroughly enjoyed their time together.

We were finally on the road just after mid-day, and we arrived at the Cardiff centre at 12:45p.m. Eddy really enjoyed meeting the people and dogs who were going to be on class with us. There was David with Robyn, John with Angel, and Margaret with Cymro. What I wanted to know was, *where's Max?* We were offered a drink and enjoyed chatting to the staff and clients. It was an incredibly happy and relaxed atmosphere. It was all very nice, but, *where's Max?* Had they brought me here under false pretences? Surely not!

As Su couldn't take me to Cwmbran for the trial walk with Max, she was offered the chance to meet him. Ah, so my Max was there somewhere! Great! But, where? His trainer, Sarah Davies, told Su that when she and Eddy left, Eddy could be put in our car for a few minutes while we went to her car to see him. So that's where he was! What a relief! He seemed very happy to meet us, in fact he seemed far happier to see Su than me! Before we knew it, he was out of the car and up on his hind legs, his front paws on Su's shoulders, licking her face. "I think he likes you Su..." I said stating the obvious. Well, that really was a fabulous first meeting for Max and Su, that's for sure, and I had the feeling he was going to be very happy when he finally moved in with us.

After Su and Eddy left, Max and I were taken back into the training centre ready to face the afternoon's proceedings with our two Guide Dog Mobility Instructors, Caroline Morton, who had trained Angel and Cymro, and Max and Robyn's trainer, Sarah. It wasn't quite what I had expected, but it was entertaining to say the least! David had the right idea when he called it line dancing. We all had to stand in a row, and one by one, we were asked to explain how to do the various actions, forward, back, left, right, while at the same time doing all the movements. I was asked to do the left behind turn, also known as the

twirly left. I've never been good at pirouetting and today was no exception. The left behind turn is primarily done when you are stood at a kerb. To do a standard left in front turn means I could end up in the road, so the twirly left is used for safety. I encourage my dog to *wait*, then take a step or two back which leaves me standing in line with his hind legs. I then have to say, *left*, while slapping my right leg twice. My dog then comes around in front of me in a clockwise direction until we are facing the correct way. All of this was done without using our dogs, hence David's line dancing comment.

Next on the agenda was a couple of walks. When it was our turn, Sarah worked Max around the block while Caroline and I followed, listening carefully to how Sarah gave him commands and how she praised him for doing it correctly. The tone of voice is especially important to get the right message through to your dog. After a short wait back in the car, it was our turn again, and this time I worked Max, or *Maxi* as he is also known by the Guide Dogs team at Cardiff. Sarah asked me to try out the soft handle instead of the metal handle, which was quite an experience. Although some people prefer it, I have to say that my preference is the standard metal handle. Using the soft handle though gave Sarah the opportunity to assess how I react to tension on the harness. It can be too easy to give a little nudge with the metal handle to encourage the dog to move on, which is something that most guide dogs hate. With the soft handle, it's impossible to do that, and you need to work hard at keeping the tension there, which makes you far more aware of your dog's speed and your own ability in following them.

After enjoying a coffee break back at the centre, we had the closing discussion of the day, during which Max decided to test out his commando crawl, just to make sure it was still working properly! It was, and to show he'd reached his target, he put one of his front paws down firmly on Robyn's head!

It was then time to head off to our accommodation for this week, the Park Inn North. It's a lovely hotel located in the Llanedeyrn area of the city. It has good size rooms, is very comfortable, and easy to settle in to. Our rooms are on the ground floor, alongside the fire exit, which is ideal as the dog spending runs are only a few feet outside the door. After familiarising myself with the layout of my room, I fed Max. He really loves his food, Royal Canin Maxi Sensible, and needs absolutely no encouragement to eat it.

I must say that all the hotel staff are excellent, as is the quality and quantity of food in the restaurant. After my starters of tomato soup with roasted peppers, and my main course of Italian meatballs with spaghetti, it was back to the room for a restful evening. It's an early start for us trainees tomorrow, up at 7a.m., breakfast at 7:45a.m., and then back out pounding the streets of Cardiff at 9a.m. Hopefully I'll get a good night's sleep and won't be woken up by a certain young German Shepherd too early!

DAY 2

“OUT FOR THE COUNT”

I barely got any sleep at all last night, while Max was out for the count. Yesterday, he had tried several times to get on to the thick vinyl mattress which had been put there for him to sleep on, but each time, the sound of scrabbling legs conjured up a vision of Bambi in my mind. At bedtime, he decided that the best way to deal with it was to get on as fast as he could and drop onto it like a ton of bricks. Well, it certainly did the trick, and I barely heard a peep out of him all night!

We made our way to the restaurant at 7:30a.m., slightly earlier than originally planned, and were treated to the most delicious full English breakfast. We gathered at the main entrance at 8:45a.m., ready to head out for some harness walks. This included two of us staying in a gorgeous old style cafe, the Deli Rouge, while the other two clients and their dogs had their walks with Caroline and Sarah. When it came to our turn, Max worked so well, he was a delight to be with. It really began feeling that we were bonding together very nicely. Something that proved this to me was as Sarah got Max out of her car, he became a typically vocal German Shepherd and did everything he could to get to me as quickly as possible. Considering he'd only been with me a little more than 20 hours, I knew there simply had to be something very special here.

We next went to the Cardiff centre of Guide Dogs for the second half of the morning, where something rather unusual was about to happen. Caroline and Sarah began taking everything they could find from inside and outside the office: a mop and bucket, wastepaper bins, a life-size Guide Dog collection box, a large dustbin, even some tall plants to name just a few! They then constructed a disaster zone, also known as an obstacle course, and we had to work our dogs around it! All four dogs did exceptionally well, with barely a mistake worth mentioning.

After lunch, we were each given a harness. Up until now, our dogs have been wearing the brown training harness that Guide Dog trainers use, but now they have beautiful crisp new white ones of their own! We next headed back out to an area we had worked our dogs yesterday, this time though, the trainers had something up their sleeves, obstacles that totally block the pavement.

When something like a car or a large wheelie-bin is blocking the pavement, and the blind person needs to be guided out into the road and then back onto the pavement to get past it, it's known as an *off-kerb*. There were several blockages the trainers had set up, and one or two that just happened to be there. Max worked through it very well indeed, and I noticed that for some reason, he manages off-kerbs far better when the road is on our right rather than on our left.

On the way back to the hotel, it was decided that we would do some walks in a large shop, so we headed out to B&Q. Once inside, we had to work our dogs up and down the aisles, keeping their pace steady because people can suddenly appear from all directions

and end up right in our way. To add insult to injury, there was a mad woman pushing a shopping trolley at us, none other than Caroline! It was all part of the set up, and at certain points, she would even totally block the aisle with the trolley so that our dogs couldn't guide us through. Once our dogs had stopped to indicate they couldn't go any further, we'd give them lots of praise and a fuss, and then Caroline would move the trolley so that we were able to continue down the aisle.

The final part of our training today was recall, which we did in the long corridor at the park Inn North where our rooms are. While Caroline or Sarah held our dog at one end, we had to trail our way along the wall right up to the other end, then whistle for our dog to come to us. Once we had hand contact with them and had clipped their lead on to their collar, we gave them a treat. The problem was that when the whistle was blown, all the dogs came charging down the corridor for the treat, not just the one whose owner had whistled!

I really hope I'll get a good sleep tonight, as I've been feeling so drained today, and I'm sure Max sensed it. We're back out at 9 o'clock in the morning for more walks, talks, and coffee breaks. The question is, shall I have a full English breakfast again? Maybe, but before that, it's fish and chips this evening!

DAY 3 “BEST FOOT FORWARD!”

I'm ever so grateful that Max stopped his new-found bit of fun before bedtime! He'd pick up his rather large smokie bone and let it drop to the floor with an almighty thud, and then repeat it over and over again! The chances of me getting some sleep last night ... or anyone else in neighbouring rooms for that matter ... would have been non-existent. I'm also very relieved to be in a ground floor room, as I feel sure we would have had some extremely irate occupants below!

Max slept soundly again last night, and, thankfully, I slept much better myself. Although it wasn't unbroken sleep, I did at least manage to get quite a few hours. I really do think it was this sleep, along with Su being so encouraging on the phone last night, which helped me get through a negative phase I found myself facing late yesterday. I was feeling so physically and mentally drained that I just couldn't see how I could handle such a large dog on a regular basis, it just seemed an impossibility to me. This morning, I felt so much better, and I was once again ready and eager to put my *best foot forward*!

I think there have been a couple more signs that Max has begun to bond with me. Early this morning, he came and laid down tight up against the side of my bed, so I was able to let my hand trail down and fondle his back. He didn't seem to mind that at all, and neither did I for that matter! After he had his breakfast, I sat on the end of the bed with my laptop, and he quickly grabbed his bone and settled down, cuddling up nice and snug to my feet.

We had a very full day on training today, with quite a variety of things going on. Off-kerbs were on the agenda again, as was a route we did yesterday but in the opposite direction. Lunchtime saw us back at the Guide Dogs centre, followed by another obstacle course like the one we did yesterday, except all the items used were of knee-height or lower. All the dogs worked twice around the course, and they all coped with it very well indeed.

Next on the list of things to do was something I hadn't done with any of my previous dogs on class. We were all given a treat for our dogs, and had to make them sit, then lie down, then sit, then stand, then sit, before they'd be given the treat. This is how it's done:

First of all, have your dog standing in front of you, and hold the treat level with their nose. Next, move your hand to just above their head while saying “*sit*.” As dogs have a somewhat restricted neck movement, the action of looking up automatically makes them sit. Then the treat is positioned between the dog's front paws as you say “*down*,” which encourages them to lie down. To get them back up into the sitting position, move the treat to just above their head and gradually bring it up while saying “*up-sit*.” As your hand moves up, the dog follows it up until they are once again in the sitting position. To make them stand, take a step or two back from them with the treat held level with their nose and call their name. Finally, to return them to the sitting position, move the treat back to just above their head and say “*sit*,” then give them their treat. It really works! Just for a bit of fun, this obedience session was ended by the four of us having two races to see which

of us could get our dogs to sit — down — sit — stand — sit the fastest!

The subject of traffic was next, discussing the various situations we face while we are out and about, and the correct ways to handle them and our dogs. Then we were back out on the road putting it into practice. The mad shopper we encountered yesterday faded into insignificance as Caroline and Sarah turned into two mad drivers, putting us through some of the situations we had discussed. It was, of course, all done under very controlled circumstances. The trainers took turns in driving and being the one right there with us giving us specific instructions. All four dogs reacted brilliantly to having cars driven at them from various directions, and they all responded beautifully, keeping us perfectly safe each and every time. What a real credit to their training and their trainers!

Something I've been doing with Max since Monday tied in very nicely with the obedience session we had today. Sarah told me He's more than willing to sit if he thinks he's going to get a treat out of it. I hold one treat in both hands, and then tightly close my fists. Initially, he would try digging into my hands with his nose, while also trying to lick into my fists to get at the treats. He quickly realised that he didn't get the treat until I opened one of my hands. This has resulted in him taking the treat far more gently than the almost snatch-and-grab approach he had at first. I also alternate which hand I open first, which keeps him guessing, and now he takes the treat like the gentle giant that he really is!

DAY 4

“THAT'S MY BOY!”

The time here feels as though it's going so fast, the end of training yesterday was the halfway mark of our time here in Cardiff! Why does it have to go so quickly? It's been intense and hard work, but it's been well worth it, it's been fabulous!

For the third night in a row, Max crashed out on his mattress, he was as quiet as a mouse. He's an absolute treasure! I'm feeling really good again, as I managed to get about the same quality and quantity of sleep as I did the second night. I can't believe it's taken me since Monday to find the sachets of coffee in my room though! They were right at the back of the tray in a little dip, hidden down behind the teabags! I ask you! I decided to get the day off to a good start with a full English breakfast, which was definitely a good move!

The first thing we did after breakfast was to go to The Range, a large store that sells a bit of this that and everything. The part we were interested in was, of course, the pet section. While the dogs sat in the cars, we were looking through all sorts of things, from treats to toys, and ropes to halties. Sarah and I agreed that the haltie I have been working Max with wasn't really that suitable for him, so we had a look at the ones they had. We found one that looked well worth trying, so that was bought for him, as well as a thick knotted rope for him to play tug-of-war with. I'm convinced the only reason the trainers took us there was so that they could spend about 10 minutes playing with all sorts of squeaky toys! I could be wrong, but it's the impression we all had.

Our first walk of the day was exceptionally long, and it was the first group walk we had done. It really put the dogs to the test, as not only did they have to concentrate on their work, but they had the distraction of seeing each other as well. After a while, they settled in well, and we all worked our way to our destination, the Deli Rouge.

After a much needed break, it was time to head back. The plan was to get a bus back to where the cars were parked, and we were all so relieved to know that we weren't expected to do that extremely long walk in the opposite direction! Because there were six people and four dogs, we split into two groups and caught separate buses. This was the first time I'd taken Max on a bus, and he was no problem at all. In fact, it seemed to me that he enjoys bus rides equally as much as Eddy. The only difference between Eddy and Max is that Max is happy sitting or lying down, whereas Eddy prefers to stand up.

This brought us up to lunchtime, and we ended up back at the Guide Dogs centre. There was a client day in progress, like the one I attended exactly two weeks ago today, and we had the opportunity to meet a few more of the newer trainers, as well as the people who had been invited to attend. While we were there, an announcement was made that Katie Roberts, who had been standing in as the District Team Manager, had officially been given the post! We were all thrilled for her, and the centre buzzed over with excitement!

Then it was back to work for us, and another chance to work our way around the obstacle

course a few more times. The difference this time was that the obstacles were higher than before, so in some cases the dogs could walk under some of them, but we wouldn't have been able to. All four dogs worked through this course particularly well, including when the course was made even more difficult for them to cope with!

The last thing planned for today was how to handle dogs that jump up at people, and food distraction. Caroline and Sarah first demonstrated a very effective way to stop a dog jumping up at you. Sarah took David's dog, Robyn, and quietly stood there with her. Caroline, pretending to be excited and overly happy to see a guide dog, approached them holding a juicy titbit in her hand. Robyn began to jump up, but as she did, Caroline immediately turned her back on her and walked away in a huff. Then she approached them again with the same response from Robyn, so Caroline turned and walked away in a huff again. When Caroline approached them for the third time, with the same excitable voice and acting over the top, Robyn didn't move a muscle! The same thing was done with Cymro and Angel with identical results! It was only Max who didn't jump up at all, not even when his trainer Sarah tried to get him to do it. *That's my boy!*

Food distraction is a real problem, especially for breeds such as Labradors. The final part of the afternoon had Caroline and Sarah causing a distraction by trying to tempt our dogs with food as we were walking past them. Once again, all the dogs did exceptionally well on this exercise as we firmly told them to *leave it*, and encouraged them to go *straight on*.

Tomorrow is our last full day of training here in Cardiff. After that, it's just Saturday morning, and then home. All four of us trainees have got on well with each other, as have all the dogs. So, just before leaving the centre to go back to the hotel late this afternoon, we exchanged phone numbers and E-mail addresses.

What's happening tomorrow? Well Caroline and Sarah seem to have a few things up their sleeves, but we do know one thing for sure: We're going on a train!

DAY 5

“HE NEVER FAILS TO IMPRESS ME!”

After almost falling asleep a number of times at the dinner table yesterday evening, I decided to try and recharge my batteries a little so that I could get a few jobs done before bedtime. So, after somehow getting back to my room, I got in to bed at about 8:15p.m. to have an hour's sleep. One thing I noticed was that I was beginning to get slight negative feelings again, but thankfully they were nowhere near as bad as the other day, and they went away very quickly. Obviously being mentally and physically exhausted triggers off a negative response in me, something I must keep in mind so that, if possible, it can be avoided! I slept for around 75 minutes before enjoying a phone call with Su.

Having been given Max's grooming equipment yesterday, making sure he had a good spruce up before bed was high on the list of things I wanted to do. He stood remarkably still while I groomed him, unlike Eddy who dances around all over the place! Having a dog that is willing to stand still while being groomed not only makes it easier to get the job done, but it takes less time!

For the fourth night in a row, Max had no problem at all falling asleep, and as I had broken sleep again, I noticed he was ever so slightly restless, but it only seemed to be him changing his position more than in previous nights.

When we got to the restaurant for breakfast, we were told that our table had been changed to one on the opposite side of the room because there was a football team staying in the hotel. I said that it was probably a team who were due to play Cardiff City, and John said that he knew Cardiff had a game on tonight. When a member of staff came to our table, I asked her if she knew which team was staying there. “Yes,” she replied, “it's an under 21's women's team.” Margaret said that she was disappointed as she was looking forward to meeting some nice chunky men!

At 9a.m., we headed out in the cars to the Queen Street area of the city where we did our second group walk, accompanied by Caroline Viney. We headed up through very busy shopping areas, our destination being a specific bus stop. As we happily stood there chatting, some buses went past without stopping. The trainers managed to ask the next driver who stopped there what was going on, and he told them that the bus stop we were stood at wasn't a pick-up stop; it was only for letting passengers off! But he very kindly let us all get on, and we travelled to the central bus station. Once off the bus, we worked our dogs around to Cardiff Central railway station and caught one of the valley's line services to the station at Queen Street. From there we worked our dogs a little more until we arrived at a cafe for a much needed break and chat.

The Guide Dogs centre was our next destination, where, after lunch, we worked our dogs through another obstacle course. This time though, the idea was to cause our dogs to walk in to a “trap,” which meant they had to about-turn and work their way back out of it. They had to adjust the course slightly as Max spotted some of them as dead-ends and

refused to walk into them! Even then Caroline and Sarah had to coax him into some of them to prove he could work his way out again! *He never fails to impress me!*

Once that was done and dusted, we discussed things you should and shouldn't do when free-running your dogs. Here are some really good points for all dog owners to remember: Never throw a stick for your dog. The reason is that there have been cases of the stick going down the dog's throat, and in some rarer cases the dog has been impaled. Another is never run your dog soon before or soon after feeding, as this can cause twisted gut which is fatal if emergency treatment can't be administered immediately. Always choose a secure place well away from roads. Avoid areas where there are stagnant ponds, as these have blue-green algae, which, although isn't fatal for a dog, can still make them very ill. Never run your dog when temperatures are high as this can cause dehydration and heat stroke. Finally, never take your dogs near fast-flowing rivers, or bodies of water which are frozen over.

With the rain falling quite heavily, we got back into the cars and headed out to Tredegar Park in Newport. It's only about a 10 minutes' drive away, but the weather was lovely and dry when we arrived there. It's this park where Su and I have enjoyed free-running our dogs for many years, and it's hopefully where Eddy and Max will meet for the very first time next Friday afternoon. Of course, the dogs really enjoyed this and burned off a load of excess energy. Max is superb when it comes to recall, or, calling him back to me, as he responds so promptly. Maybe the little biscuit I hide in my hand has something to do with it? Once back at the hotel, we played another two games of sit — down — sit — stand — sit with the dogs in the corridor outside our rooms.

Arrangements were made for the class to go out for a meal as it was our last evening together, and once again Caroline Viney joined up with the six of us. The venue was Cosmos, a huge buffet type establishment that serves Chinese food. It was good, and I tried crispy seaweed for the very first time. It sounds disgusting but tastes absolutely gorgeous! Over in the desserts section, there was the most beautiful carrot cake I have ever tasted, and I had about four pieces of it. To be fair, they were small pieces, honest!

Tomorrow is our last day here in Cardiff, but we'll be training up until about 12p.m. Then it'll be time for all of us to take our dogs home. From next Monday, they'll begin learning the routes they'll be using on a regular basis. Before that though, we'll be spending the rest of the weekend with them, continuing the bonding process, and helping them to settle into their new home environments.

DAY 6

“I'M REALLY SORRY DAD!”

I'm not sure how it happened, but after grooming Max and talking to Su on the phone last night, I fell asleep fully clothed on top of the bed. At around 1a.m., I woke up, freezing cold and shivering. What a horrible feeling that was! I also began feeling very nervous about going home, but I wasn't sure why. When I trained with my first two guide dogs, we stayed at home for the weekend at the end of the second week, and then returned to the training centre for the third week. When we left the centre for home at the end of that third week, our dogs began learning their new routes around our home area. By this time, we were far more settled in with our dogs.

With Eddy, I had domiciliary training, or in other words, trained from home, so right from day one, he began learning the routes in our home area while the bonding began. As far as Max is concerned, I have bonded with him very quickly, a bond that has been regularly commented on by his trainer Sarah. So, maybe the nerves were just in relation to a new set of circumstances? Something different to what I have done in the past? I just don't know. Whatever, I made myself a hot drink, got myself into bed, and I'm pleased to say, slept rather well! Best of all, on waking up this morning, those nervous feelings had gone.

We headed out from the Park Inn North hotel at 9a.m. for our last walk this week. It was another group walk, but this time with a difference. Throughout the week, the trainers had been there with us, advising, helping, and supporting us all the way. Now they were backing out of the picture and making us do all the work on our own. John and Angel were to head the walk, and John had a radio linked to Caroline who would be giving him directions, such as "turn right at the next down kerb," which he had to relay to us when we all reached that point. The radio would also prove very useful if we found ourselves in serious difficulty, but thankfully we didn't need it for that. Completing the convoy was Max and I in second position, David and Robyn in third, and Margaret and Cymro bringing up the rear. Imagine, Saturday morning in Cardiff City centre! It was manic!

The first part of the walk included an area where lampposts had been placed in the centre of the pavement. Why they couldn't have been put to the side is anyone's guess, but, in a few instances of a slight lapse in concentration, Max managed to walk me into about three of them along the route. None of the bumps were serious, but I needed to point the posts out to him by tapping them with my hand while telling him: "No." As I did, he burrowed his face into my legs as hard as he could, as if to say, *"I'm really sorry dad!"* Apart from those few instances, he worked extremely well.

A totally congested bus stop blocked our path, so we all waited until it sounded as though the area had cleared before attempting to move on. The dogs had to work so hard this morning through some horrendous areas, and even though there were a few minor mishaps, they all did exceptionally well! There was a reward for us at the end of the walk, our final visit of the week to Deli Rouge! It would have been worth ten bumps on lampposts in my opinion!

We had some photos taken before returning to the hotel for our Midday departures, the time that none of us were looking forward to. It's been a fabulous week, none of us wanted it to end; we all wanted to do another week! Caroline mentioned that they may arrange a top-up class in January, just for a couple of days, and all of us were all more than willing to go back to Cardiff for that.

It was ever so quiet when we arrived home. My son Paul and daughter-in-law Kate were out somewhere, and Su and Eddy were in Coventry staying with our friend Liz. They travelled there shortly after taking me to the Guide Dog centre on Monday, and they will be staying there for most of the coming week to allow Max to settle in. Max seemed really happy in his new surroundings, and he thoroughly enjoyed investigating the garden before coming back indoors to find a couple of bones on his bed which he settled down with quite nicely. He seems to be such an easy dog to please.

My best friend, Philip King, along with his wife Gwyneth and daughter Emily called around briefly to bring the chocolate bouquet I had ordered as a thank you for Max's trainer Sarah, and as I opened the door, I heard a chorus of "Oh my goodness what a gorgeous dog!" Max is so warm and friendly; it was as if he'd already known them for a long time. When they knocked the door, I was half expecting a loud bark, but there was nothing. Just silence, apart from the ring of his bell as he made his way to the front door. There was a slight bark when he heard Paul and Kate letting themselves in, but other than that, he's been incredibly quiet.

Not surprisingly, I've already fallen asleep in the armchair a couple of times, no doubt catching up on a few hours of sleep that I lost out on through the week. It was still very quiet here throughout the evening, and it's likely to be quiet tomorrow as well, but after the hectic week we just had with all the hustle, bustle, and noise of the city, it's a welcome change. Breakfast has been so enjoyable the past five mornings, I wonder if Kate would be willing to cook me breakfast tomorrow? Somehow, I doubt it. Oh well, never mind, I think it's time for me to make a mug of tea, and enjoy the large slice of carrot cake I brought home from that fabulous cafe, *Deli Rouge!*

DAY 7

“WIN SOME, LOSE SOME”

I really enjoyed relaxing in the armchair late yesterday evening with a bottle of real ale. Max seemed really interested in it and was doing all he could to get a good sniff and lick of the top of the bottle. Well of course, I had to tell him that *drink-driving just isn't on*. I soon fell asleep, and on waking up about 1a.m. found that I hadn't even got remotely close to finishing it. After taking Max out to the garden to make sure he was comfy for the rest of the night, I headed off to bed.

I couldn't help but wonder how Max would be on his first night here. But I needn't have concerned myself over it. He had followed me around for a while as I got ready for bed, and I wondered where he might decide to sleep. He has a bed in the living room, but I thought he'd prefer to be upstairs with me, especially as this is a new place to him, and he'd want his dad right there with him ... right? *Wrong!* Oh well, win some, lose some.

Today, Sunday, is a day of rest, a lovely chill-out time for Max and I. Caroline told us in our debriefing that if we wanted to take the dogs for a walk on lead, that was fine, but we must take someone with us as a sighted guide, and we must only take our dogs along routes that they'll be learning while working in harness next week. My friend Philip told me yesterday that the landlord of the Commercial Hotel in town used to have German Shepherds, and that Max would be a massive hit there. How ideal is that!

The Commercial Hotel is a pub at the furthest end of my route in town! I decided to send Philip a text message to see if he would be willing to accompany Max and I on a walk there this afternoon, just so that Max could get an idea of his new surroundings, be introduced to one of the routes he will be doing next week, have a stretch of legs, a breath of fresh air, and, just as an afterthought, we could have a chat, and, well, maybe even a pint as well, but not necessarily in that order of importance. Of course, Philip was more than happy to oblige!

For some reason or other, Max decided to have a small barking session this morning. He has a really nice sounding bark, firm and commanding, although somewhat higher in tone than what I'd been expecting. It crossed my mind that we hadn't had a game of tug-of-war with his rope since getting home, so it was fetched out and we had a great time together. The only thing that isn't fair is that he knows that by getting his crocodile teeth as close to my fingers as he possibly can, he's going to win every time!

Things got a little noisier early this afternoon when he discovered one of Eddy's toys. I had asked Paul and Kate to bag up Eddy's toys while he was away as I didn't know what Max was like with them. Would he be fine, just playing with them and having fun with the noises they make, or would he put those teeth to use and rip them apart? I thought *better safe than sorry* and had them put up out of the way. But he seems fine with the pig he managed to find, and filled the room with endless oinking for at least 15 minutes! As Philip was calling at about 2p.m. to go out for the walk with us, I had to give Max a groom to

make sure he looked presentable. This, of course, had the added bonus of drastically reducing the number of oinks I had to put up with!

Max really enjoyed the time we spent at the pub, and the barmaid loved him to bits! There was quite a bit of noise for a Sunday afternoon, rugby on the TV, loud music in a neighbouring room, but he wasn't bothered by any of it. After being sat there for a while next to an empty table, the door opened and a man walked in, took one look at Max, and said: "I'm not sitting there!" But my gorgeous little Max wasn't put off by that at all, in fact, when the man stood by the bar, Max did everything he could to try and get nearer to him to attract his attention!

When we were back home from our first expedition around town, I decided to order in some food from a local Chinese take away called Cantonese Kitchen, which is only just around the corner from the Commercial Hotel. It's nowhere near as good as the food at the park Inn North, but at least it would keep me going! One solitary bark was all Max could muster up when they knocked the door, but it was enough for me to know they were there. Max was eagerly trying to poke his nose out to see who was outside, and in the darkness of the doorway, caused by my forgetting to turn the hallway light on; the delivery lady suddenly noticed something. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "you've got a new dog!" I took the food through to the kitchen, and as I put the two cans of coke I'd ordered into the fridge to chill, I thought to myself: "It's such a shame they don't sell *Pepsi Max!*"

DAY 8

“MOTHER NATURE”

Max has already developed a strong love for Paul and Kate, and he can tell when they're leaving the flat downstairs by the sound of their door opening and closing. Once he hears it, he's away into our kitchen to wait for them to come through. There's supposed to be a right of way along the back of the houses here, but as it's been unused for so many years, it's well and truly overgrown, and there's no proper footpath, just a narrow rough dirt path. So, we prefer them to use the house as their way through to the flat. This has been very much appreciated by Eddy over the past few months, and now by Max, as they see them far more regularly. When Paul and Kate arrived home from a party last night, Max was absolutely delighted to see them, and within seconds he'd taken them the now oinkless pig so that they could play with him. They were more than happy to throw the toy for him to catch, and needless to say, he kept coming back for more, and more ... and more!

Max settled down very well again last night on his bed in the living room. I gave him a 'night-night' cuddle, headed up the stairs, and he just stayed there, making no effort at all to follow me. Throughout the day, if I go upstairs, he's right there alongside me, following me around like a little lost lamb.

I woke up about 4:30a.m. this morning because Mother Nature was giving me one of her early morning calls. Once back in bed, I just lay there, mulling things over in my mind. Now and again, I heard the tinkle of Max's bell in the room below, but there was no major movement from him. About 45 minutes later, there was a more distinctive sound to his bell, which made me realise he had got up, rather than just moving a little. I swung my legs out of bed, and as my toes slid into my slippers, there he was, appearing in the bedroom. He's beginning to learn how to carry that bell without making it ring too much! Thinking that good old Mother Nature might be having a go at him as well, I went downstairs to open the kitchen door, but he just wandered back over to his bed again. Decision time: Do I go back to bed or have a drink and use my computer for a while? Ah that chilled coke was so refreshing!

Today was supposed to have been our first day of training in our hometown. As Max and I were scheduled for an afternoon visit from Sarah, we were having a somewhat relaxing morning when there was a phone call from her. Unfortunately, her pet dog had injured its leg, so she had to arrange a vet appointment to get it checked out. The poor dog was so distressed; she didn't want to come out on visits while leaving him at home all alone. To be honest, what caring dog owner would? Rather than waste the day and do nothing, I gave Max a groom, had a game of tug-of-war, and did some obedience with him, all of which helps to strengthen our bonding.

I also used some of the time to research Max's family. Thanks to Liz Dale who had puppy walked Max's sister Maya, I knew his dad was Aussie, his mum was Lexis, and the rest of his litter were Marley, Mercer, Merlin, Midge, Mitsy, Monty, and Mossie. She also told me his maternal grandmother was Pella who was pregnant with Lexis's litter when she

had been flown from Guide Dogs California to the Guide Dogs for the Blind here in the UK. By searching on Google, I not only found out that his maternal grandfather was Zodiac, but thanks to a lady named Lynne Davis who kept Fogerty, the father of Pella's first litter, I was put in touch with Bonnie Finsthwait who kept Pella while she was in California. Bonnie told me that the original plan was that Pella would stay in the UK for a year, and would then be taken back to California once pregnant by a UK German Shepherd stud dog to take a new strain of dogs back to the states. But Guide Dogs in California had decided that they were going to remove German Shepherds from their breeding programme, and so Pella remained in the UK. She had her last litter here in April 2011. Bonnie's description of Pella could easily be of Max: "*Pella had a sweet, affectionate temperament. She trained easily and was very focused and willing to please.*" It's quite evident that her excellent qualities have passed on to her future generations! One other thing that Bonnie told me that I thought was really nice is that she has a grandson named *Max*.

There's one thing for sure, and that is that the walk Max and I did with Philip yesterday afternoon to the Commercial Hotel and back again will stand Max in good stead for his very first harness walk in Abertillery tomorrow. I'm really looking forward to it!

DAY 9 “A REFRESHING CHANGE”

I wondered how long it would take, and today was the day! Each night since Max and I were partnered up in Cardiff last Monday, I set my mobile phone alarm for 7a.m. to make sure that I was awake in time to feed him. This meant that as we headed out at 9a.m. to work the streets around Cardiff, his tummy would be nicely settled. German Shepherds are particularly susceptible to torsion, or twisted gut, especially if they are taken for exercise too soon after eating. Two hours is fine though, so each night, I set my alarm for the same time the next morning. He didn't really respond at all to the fact that a piece of music, “State of Grace” by Liquid Tension Experiment, had begun playing, and that within a few moments I was getting his food for him. Even by the time we were home, he still hadn't made the connection, but, this morning, the penny finally dropped. As the music filled the air, I heard him coming up the stairs, and he appeared beside my bed, full of excitement that it was his breakfast time! Clever lad Max, I just thought you may have picked it up a little quicker. Ah well, better late than never!

Our visit with Sarah was scheduled for this afternoon, so I made sure Max was groomed in readiness. She arrived at 1:30p.m., and the route we were to walk was the same as the one Philip and I took him on Sunday. He worked beautifully, not a single bump, not even a slight brush against anything. As we came to the awkward part of town, the shared surface area, he remembered the way we had walked it on Sunday and managed it well. *What a clever boy!* As we made our way through the main shopping street, I could hear comments from people admiring his beauty. I felt proud, and I'm sure in his own way, so did Max. I paused briefly and pointed out the Coffee Shop to Sarah and told her that it's a place we visit regularly. We continued down to the end of the street, and Sarah asked what places I used past that point. I told her just to the left is Iceland, straight on and you come to J.D. Wetherspoon, to the left of that is the Commercial Hotel, or if we were to go to the right from where we were, there is the arcade with another cafe we use and the bus stops. Sarah chose to use Iceland as the destination today, and then we would work him down to the bus stops and get a bus back home.

As we stood waiting to cross the road after leaving Iceland, a concerned lady asked what was wrong with my other dog. Sarah explained there was nothing wrong, but that he is now 10 years-old and enjoying his retirement. On reaching the bus stop, a gentleman exclaimed: “Oh you've got a new dog!” I grinned at him and said: “Oh you noticed!” Having had three yellow dogs so far, I've been so used to people not realising when one dog had retired and I now had another one. I must say that this was a refreshing change.

Even though the journey home on the bus was very bumpy, jerky, and uncomfortable, Max took it all in his stride. Nothing bothers him at all, he's almost bombproof! I was so busy chatting to Sarah that I missed our stop, which meant Max had an additional walk to get home. He didn't seem to mind, and I had the opportunity to work him through a tricky part where the pavement disappears and then opens back out again. Sarah and I were both really impressed with how well he managed it, considering he'd never been

along that stretch of our street before!

Once we were home, Sarah made it very clear how happy she was with the way the walk had gone, and that I should be very happy with it myself. I was! Believe me ... I was! She then gave me details on what we would be doing tomorrow. The same route into town, but with a slight difference. She wouldn't be walking a pace or two behind us, but instead, she'd be hanging right back out of sight, watching us from a distance. I'm to wait for a phone call from her at about 1:30p.m., then make my way to town to meet her in the Coffee Shop. After the brilliant walk I had with him today, I'm really looking forward to it!

Before Sarah left, she told me she had been meaning to give me the phone number for Sue Coleman, the lady who boarded Max in Cardiff for 10 weeks while he was completing his advanced training, but she'd kept forgetting. She told me Sue had been keen to hear how Max was getting on, and so I was more than happy to phone her and bring her up to date. We had an enjoyable chat, and it was lovely for me to hear about all the things that had gone on during the ten weeks that she had boarded him. To say that the call had given me a lift for the rest of the evening would be an understatement!

DAY 10

“MAX, NO!”

Feeling myself gradually falling asleep as I sat in the armchair last night, I decided to get a treat for Max and do a brief obedience session with him, the sit — down — sit — stand — sit that we were taught on class. I then hauled myself off to bed, and although it was earlier than usual, I felt sure my body wouldn't complain about the extra rest. I gave Max his 'night-night' cuddle, and he followed me upstairs. Seeing that all I was doing was getting ready for bed, he headed back downstairs. I woke up about 4a.m., and for the next 2 hours I drifted in and out of sleep. In one of my waking moments, it suddenly dawned on me that we couldn't go to the Coffee Shop as they close around lunchtime on Wednesdays, so, Marenghi's cafe in the Arcade it would have to be.

Just after 6a.m., a sleek body with four silent paws, a long tail, pointed ears and a very inquisitive nose appeared at the side of my bed. Thank goodness he was wearing his bell, as I at least got a little warning! “Maybe he needs to go to the garden,” I thought, “after all, we did go to bed earlier than usual.” So, down the stairs we went, and after popping his head out of the kitchen door to sniff the fresh morning air, he headed straight back to bed. As I was feeling thirsty anyway, I decided to make myself a mug of tea and check my E-mails, after all, 7 o'clock will be here before too long.

Time check: 6:58a.m. It's so annoying how two minutes can seem an eternity when you're waiting for something to happen! At last!! There it was. I sat waiting for a reaction. Nothing. Not a murmur, not a twitch. Maybe I confused him by being downstairs with him while leaving my mobile phone upstairs? Ah, some movement, some realisation! Yes, he's cottoned on, it's breakfast time!

After feeding him, I let him out into the garden to do what he needed to do. It was a cold but dry morning, and it was peaceful ... “*was*” being the operative word. Young Max had seen our next-door neighbour's cat in their garden! Now I've heard him in full swing, he really does have the bark I was expecting; he must have been bottling it up! I have found Max to be very responsive to his name being used, and this morning he demonstrated it again. “*Max, no!*” I growled at him. There was silence as he headed back to the kitchen. He was almost inside when he made a lightning-fast turnaround and went back for another go! “*Max, no!*” I repeated even more firmly, and once more there was silence as he headed back. I wasn't overly concerned about the volume I used for my commands as I felt sure that, thanks to Max, the neighbours would have been well and truly awake by now anyway! This time I managed to get him into the kitchen and closed the door before

he could get back out there for a third go.

At about 10:15, Max barked and went to the front door. I assumed the postman had knocked and I hadn't heard him. It was actually the neighbours going out. "Oh look there he is!" Lesley exclaimed. I smiled, and she said to me: "Aaron said to me yesterday, 'mum, next door's got a new dog, it's a Husky.'" I apologised for the disturbance at 7a.m., but I was very pleased to hear that they were totally oblivious to it!

Sarah phoned at 12:50, telling me she would be arriving in 20 minutes. This meant that our walk would start 20 minutes earlier than planned, a real bonus as it meant I would miss the hectic traffic that makes a crossing at the bottom of the nearby industrial estate very difficult. She phoned again to say she had parked up and was ready to follow us from a distance, and to set off as soon as we were ready. I mentioned to her that the Coffee Shop would be closed as it's Wednesday afternoon, so I suggested to her that we could go to Marengi's in the Arcade instead.

Max settled into his work right from the word go, or should that be "*forward*"? We repeated the walk into town that we did yesterday, with the exception that Sarah was staying well back out of sight, but close enough that she could see exactly what was happening. Sure enough, the junction that tends to be exceptionally busy was very quiet, making for an easy crossing. On the up kerb, we turned right and headed past Abertillery Comprehensive School and its playing fields. Max's pace was beautiful, no tension, just calm, and relaxed, he was taking it all in his stride. As we neared the top of the Foundry Bridge which takes us into town, he must have realised that he couldn't curve down the slope because there were some youngsters coming up it. Rather than wait for them to move out of the way, he went to the top of the small flight of steps to the left of the slope. Once he heard my "*forward*" command, he moved carefully and slowly down the steps, swinging left at the bottom to take me along the bridge. He needed a little encouragement to find the next crossing point yesterday as it's around the corner a little, but there was no need of any encouragement today. He was bang on target!

Next, he had to deal with the pedestrian crossing that leads us on to the shared surface, but again, it wasn't a problem for him. He was heading slightly left as we reached the other side, taking us too close to a pillar, but he corrected himself, moving gently to the right of it, and then back to the left to pick up the building line. Meanwhile, all around us was a large group of excitable and noisy teenagers, shouting at each other and throwing food in all directions. I kept my voice and commands calm, encouraging him to "*find the way*," and he did just that, taking no notice of what was going on around us, as if there was nothing unusual happening, just a part of normal everyday life.

At the end of the main street, Church Street, he picked up his crossing point beautifully, just outside Eileen Jenkin's florists. Little did we know that Sarah was inside, peering out at us through the window! The traffic was quite busy, and a very kind lady offered to help us across the road which was much appreciated. Once on the opposite side, we made a right turn and headed towards the Arcade. I could sense the entranceway, so let him go on just a pace or two too far, then did a back turn, and was about to follow it up with a right turn into the Arcade when he caught sight of Sarah ... and that was that!

While sitting in Marengi's, Sarah told me she was absolutely delighted with the quality of Max's work, and so was I! Once all the positives had been mentioned, I asked for any negatives. There were none! Having already had three guide dogs, I know not to look at things through rose tinted spectacles. At some point, I will get a bad walk, and that is when I need to sit down and reflect on all the good ones we've had.

Something else we wanted to do this afternoon was to get Max weighed. Although he won't be registered with Budget Vets in town, they are more than happy for us to use their weighing scales. To weigh him at Abbey Vets where he will soon be registered would mean a round trip of about 30 miles. Just like Eddy, Max is more than happy to pop himself up on the scales. Sarah told me he weighed 36.5 kilos, and she remembered telling me last week that he was 47.5 kilos. She popped him on there again, just to double-check. 36.5 kilos. Well, he's certainly not looking as thin as a rake, so we're assuming she may have forgotten what his weight really was.

We decided to get the bus home again, this time my local friendly bus company, Henley's, and not Stagecoach. The driver, Gordon, noticed I had a new dog and began asking all the usual sort of questions that guide dog owners are used to. The ride home was so much nicer than yesterday.

Once we were back indoors, Sarah and I chatted over the walk we had done, and we were both very impressed with how Max had worked. She then told me that tomorrow afternoon we would introduce Max to the route that takes me to the nursing home where my dad lives. But before that, she said she wanted me to do a solo walk to town with Max in the morning. I told her I felt very uneasy about that, as Thursday is market day, and I usually do whatever I can to avoid it! She said there was no pressure, but to have a think about it, and if I felt I could manage it, then go ahead and try it. She reminded me that Glenda Webb from the Dog Welfare Team had planned a visit with us early tomorrow afternoon, so if I chose to go to town with Max, then I really needed to make sure I was back home in plenty of time.

I ran it over in my mind nearly all evening, unsure as to whether I would feel able to do it or not. I ordered a pizza and let the evening drift away. Could I cope with going to town on my own in the morning? It would be our very first solo walk, no trainer behind us, no back-up, just Max and I facing the big bad world on our own!

DAY 11

“YOU COULD HAVE FOOLED ME!”

Max didn't seem at all settled when I went to bed last night; he didn't even want his night-night cuddle. Although he followed me upstairs and stayed with me for a few minutes, he soon made his way back downstairs again. I lay there for a while listening for his bell, but there was just silence, and I soon fell asleep.

It was just before 5a.m. when I woke up, and after laying there for quite a while, I decided to check out Facebook on my iPhone. I don't know if he realised I was awake because of my phone's synthetic voice, but only a few moments later he came into my room and lay down next to my bed, before trying to get me to play. When he began barking, I had to try and encourage him to be quiet, and as with the situation with the cat early yesterday morning, he was very responsive. I told him that barking at 7 o'clock was bad enough, but an hour and a half earlier is simply not on!

From the time I fed him at 7a.m., I knew I wanted to do the walk into town. I thought to myself that if Sarah trusts Max and I, then I should do it. The thought of a bacon butty and mug of tea was just too much for me to ignore, and so at 9a.m. Max and I headed off to the Coffee Shop so that he was introduced to another place we use regularly.

On leaving the Coffee Shop, Max and I headed straight into a nightmare, otherwise known as the market. There were people absolutely everywhere, some of them with dogs that caused a distraction for Max, but the worst part was all the stands, tables and chairs that traders and shopkeepers block the pavements with. I don't mind there being a market in town on a Thursday, but why can't people be more considerate and think of others? It made Max's work difficult, but bless his heart, he took his time, and after slowly digging his way through the chaos, he got us safely out the other end.

We caught a bus back home and waited for Glenda from the dog welfare team to pay us a visit. As she had an appointment herself this morning, she wasn't sure exactly what time she'd be with us. Sarah was also due to visit us at 2p.m., so at 1:15p.m. when there was still no sign of Glenda, I sent Sarah a text message letting her know she still hadn't arrived.

No sooner had I pressed the send button than there was a knock on the door, and there stood Glenda. We had an enjoyable visit, and she told me a lot about Max's history. This included the news that there were actually 9 puppies in Max's litter, and not the 8 we knew about. Very sadly, a girl named Mossie had died in the nest. It really helped to know what Max had been through the past 20 months or so, and she told me that many of the problems he had were basically his way of saying: 'I don't like kennels, get me out of here, I want human company!' I also learned that on a couple of occasions he had a slight limp problem, once on a hind leg, and the other on the front. In both instances, the problem cleared up very quickly. He also has an overshooting jaw, which means his teeth don't have a very good biting edge. *You could have fooled me!* When he plays, he loves to mouth my arm, and I'm almost waiting for his crocodile chompers to meet somewhere in

the middle! Before she left, Glenda wanted to make sure that I knew how to groom him properly. Things were going rather nicely, until Sarah knocked on the door. He suddenly spun around, hitting my jaw firmly with his head, and I exclaimed: "That's two of us with jaws that don't align properly now!"

Glenda also suggested that, because we have very steep stairs and Eddy is now 10 years old, it would be a good idea to put a stair gate at the bottom to make upstairs out of bounds. Although at the moment Eddy can quite happily make his way up and down, as can Max, as Eddy grows older, he's far more likely to misjudge them or stumble on them. So, putting a gate there will make it safer for them, both now and in the future.

Once Glenda had said her goodbyes, Sarah and I chatted about the route we were going to do to Grosvenor House, a nursing home where my dad lives. The first half of the route Max already knows well, as it's the same as when we go to town. For the second half of the route, we use the pedestrian crossing and head up the hill to the nursing home.

Max was working well again, and, as we headed into a fairly narrow street, there were some tight spots and obstacles to negotiate. His concentration was excellent, and he got us through with no problem at all.

After spending a little time with my dad, we began making our way back home. At first, I thought it was just the downward slope that was causing Max to pick up speed, but it soon became evident that it was something else when my right shoulder firmly met a lamppost. We took him back several paces and asked him to work that stretch again. This time, he got past it OK, but he was very alert, His concentration was on something somewhere, but we didn't know what or where it was. As we crossed the road at the end of the cemetery, Sarah spotted the problem, it was a cat! I asked Max to *sit*, and we waited until the cat was out of sight. Sarah suggested I did some obedience with him to get his mind back on me and what we were doing, rather than on the cat. This worked really well, and we completed our walk safely.

Once more, Sarah was extremely happy with how Max had worked, other than the bump on the lamppost, but at least there was a reason for that. She said she was going to leave the harness with us again just in case I felt like working Max into town in the morning, and in the afternoon, we can introduce him to our doctor's surgery. The plan of Max meeting Eddy at Tredegar Park has been changed because Caroline Morton remembered how lively Max had been there last week, and she thought it might be just a little too much for Eddy to cope with on their first meet. We will now be meeting up under more controlled circumstances at the Coffee Shop in town.

DAY 12

“YOU CHEEKY MONKEY!”

Max was crashed out most of yesterday evening, obviously it had been a lot of hard work and concentration for him through the day, but I've got to say that I'm ever so proud of him for what he has achieved in such a short space of time.

He suddenly livened up when Paul and Kate arrived home, and I hoped it didn't mean that he was going to be restless overnight as I really felt I needed a night of unbroken sleep. Thankfully, Max settled down very nicely, as did I, and he didn't wake me up until 6a.m. A few minutes later, I trundled off into the loo, thinking to myself, “On my next guide dog application form I'm going to say I want a dog that doesn't wake up until 8a.m.” I could hear Max's bell gently ringing, but I couldn't make out where he was. Once I was back in the bedroom, I listened for his bell. Nothing. I took a few more steps, and heard the tiniest of rings. I thought he must be in the room with me somewhere, but where? I slowly wandered around, being careful not to tread on him, but he was nowhere to be found.

Confused, I thought the sound of the bell must have just echoed in an odd way and he was outside the room or maybe even downstairs. As I got back into bed, I almost sat on a rather large fluffy life-size German Shepherd hot water bottle! “*You cheeky monkey!*” I said, encouraging him to get down. “Mum doesn't like dogs on her bed, so you'd better get used to it.” That's an added bonus of having a stair gate I suppose!

We soon headed downstairs, Max to his bed, and me to the kitchen to make a coffee. I'd brought my iPhone down with me as it needed charging, and left it in the room with him while I went into the other room to use my computer. At 7a.m., my alarm went off, and in the split second it took me to wonder how he would react to it this morning, he suddenly appeared at my side all full of excitement. It definitely seems as though he's got the alarm thing sussed out now.

After he had his breakfast, I opened the kitchen door for him to go to the garden and noticed that the weather wasn't exactly the best for meeting Su and Eddy in the street. I couldn't imagine Su being too happy sitting on a soaking wet chair outside the Coffee Shop waiting for us. I checked the weather forecast to find it was supposed to be partly cloudy with a temperature of 12 degrees. “Not bad,” I thought, hoping that the afternoon would be nice and dry for the meet up.

At 1:30p.m., Sarah phoned and asked me to do the walk into town while she and Caroline Morton observed from a distance. I was really hoping that the walk would be a good one, and a good one it most definitely was! We arranged to meet at the bottom of the Foundry Bridge, so that we could teach Max the route into my doctor's surgery. It was a route that I'd done countless times with Eddy, but now having a new dog, I thought there was likely a better way of doing it. I was right, although it was only a minimal change to the way Eddy was used to. Max was picking it up quickly, and we went over it a few times to make sure he definitely knew what he had to do. Finally, we took him inside so that he knew

the way into the waiting room. He was obviously excited to be in a new place because he jumped up and put his front paws on the reception desk!

Leaving the surgery, we then headed into town for the meet-up with Su and Eddy. Some inconsiderate parking had made it awkward for Max, but he managed to get me past it remarkably well. Sarah, Caroline and I stopped briefly to chat about the badly parked car and how well Max had done, while Su and Eddy were sat patiently waiting just a little way along the street on the opposite side. Caroline decided to leave Max with Sarah while she took me over to spend a few minutes with Eddy as we hadn't seen each other for almost 2 weeks. Unfortunately, the owners of the Coffee Shop had decided to close early, so the venue was changed to Marengi's Cafe in the Arcade. The idea was for Su and I to wait there while Sarah and Caroline took the dogs for a walk around town together. We hadn't been sat down for more than a couple of minutes when they arrived. Eddy wasn't happy that mum and dad had left him, so he put his brakes firmly on and refused to go anywhere with Caroline, other than the direction we had gone!

We all enjoyed our time together, and both dogs seemed quite happy to be sat fairly close to one another. As Eddy has been used to travelling alone in the back of our car for several years now, I asked Caroline and Sarah if they could just spend a few minutes with us in the car park, just to make sure that there was enough room for them both. Because of Max's extra length, we wanted to work out which dog it would be best to put in first. They suggested that as Eddy is used to it being his car, it would be a good idea to try letting him get in first. I wondered how Max would cope, jumping in and then having to try and turn around with Eddy taking up a good deal of space, but he found it no problem at all. It's amazing how a dog of his size can manage to spin on a sixpence!

Once home, we couldn't help but wonder how the two of them would get on. Meeting on neutral ground didn't cause a problem, but now Eddy had to face another dog being on his territory. Max can be a bit on the bossy side, and Eddy is much more laid back and tends to keep out of the way. We took them through to the garden so they had an open area, hoping that they would get to know each other a little better. Max soon became quite excitable and started barking at Eddy, trying to get him to play. Eddy on the other hand just sat there, showing absolutely no interest in Max at all.

We managed to get a few photos, and they both seemed happy enough to sit together for those. Once back indoors, Eddy spotted piggy and went to fetch it. Max, noticing what Eddy was doing, pounced on him, and stole piggy out of his mouth! Disgusted, Eddy walked out of the room. Over the next few hours, Eddy would wander back in the room, lie down for a few minutes, and walk back out again. Eventually, both settled down at opposite ends of the room, but at least they were in the same room together!

As the evening progressed, I suggested going for a meal at Tredegar in the Tafarn Ty Uchaf, or 'Top House' as locals call it. The landlord, Terry Ham, had very kindly said that Eddy could still go there even when he was no longer a working guide dog. We had a very enjoyable evening there with Jan Williams, a long-time friend and local guide dog owner, and everyone seemed more than happy to meet the new kid on the block.

DAY 13

"A LAZY DAY"

I was absolutely exhausted by the time we got home from having the meal out last night, so I headed straight to bed, totally forgetting to set my alarm for 7a.m. Su has always been 'as good as gold' making sure that our dogs have gone to the garden so that they're comfy for the night, so I knew I had nothing to worry about there. I totally crashed out, and slept very soundly, not even being aware of Su coming to bed.

I woke up just before 7:45a.m. with the sound of a bell tinkling its way up the stairs. Su was still fast asleep, but not for much longer! I was fully expecting Max to head to my side of the bed to tell me it was well past their breakfast time, but he didn't, he went around Su's side of the bed. She got the shock of her life when she was suddenly woken up by him shoving his cold wet nose at her!

As I got out of bed and headed downstairs to feed our boys, I couldn't help feeling pleased with myself for how I have managed to arrange their feeding times. I'd sorted it in such a way that I don't have to worry about Max trying to force his way into Eddy's bowl after having finished his own. First of all, I get both their bowls of food ready. Eddy gets his first, and then Max gets his just a few moments later. I do it in this order because I've noticed that Max eats a lot quicker than Eddy. Once Max has finished, I put him straight out into the garden to do what he needs to do. Because Eddy is so much slower at eating, it means he's just about finished his food when Max comes back in. I stand in the way so that Max can't get the last bit of food out of Eddy's bowl, and I then put Eddy out into the garden. This also gives them some peace and quiet in the garden to do their business.

Today has been a lazy day to say the least, neither of our boys have had a walk, but they have at least been getting plenty of exercise following us around the house. I'm pleased to say that Eddy seems to be happier today than he was yesterday. We know it'll take time for him to adjust and to be happy with sharing his home with Max, if he'll ever be totally happy with it that is, but at least there's a noticeable improvement! A few times today, as one of them went to check on Su, they were quickly followed by the other! On one occasion, having not closed the loo door properly, Su found herself in the company of both boys, and the room isn't that big in the first place!

Max loves sticking his nose into anything he can find, which has earned him the nickname *Beaky*. When Su returned home this afternoon with about a half-a-dozen bags of shopping, Max decided he was going to check them all out, even while Su was still trying to carry them through. "Come on Beaky," I told him, "get your nose out of the shopping." Su heard me calling him "Beaky," and ever since then she has been calling him "*Captain*"! Captain Beaky ... that's going back a bit, isn't it?

During her visit on Thursday, Glenda recommended that we get them both a Nylobone, so while Su was shopping, she managed to get them one each, although you'd have thought that she'd got them both for Max! He can't seem to grasp the idea that even

though there are two, one of them is Eddy's, not his. To be fair, Eddy took one look at his Nylobone and turned his nose up at it, just as Su had expected.

I'd been really looking forward to grooming Eddy and Max this evening. The technique Glenda showed me on Thursday worked brilliantly on Max, so I wanted to see if it did as good a job with Eddy, and I wasn't disappointed in the slightest! In the past, I was always told to brush from back to front, then brush from front to back, then comb from front to back, but never ever comb the tail, only brush it. It's been like that for the past twenty-two years for me, but now it's changed.

Firstly, you start with your fingertips, digging into the dog's coat, almost massaging from back to front. Max really loves this part, as did Eddy when I did it on him for the first time today. It helps to loosen up all the dead hairs so that they can be brushed out much easier. As you become more familiar with the shape and condition of your dog's body by using the finger grooming technique, it gives you a much better chance of finding lumps or other abnormalities that need to be checked out by a vet as soon as possible. Next you brush from back to front and finally comb from front to back. And as for combing the tail, it's fine to do that as long as you keep the teeth of the comb at a right angle to their tail. It works beautifully! I wanted to try the sit — down — sit — stand — sit with Eddy as well as Max, but I was concerned that not only would Eddy be reluctant to do it because of arthritic joints, but that Max may dive in and steal the treat from my hand before Eddy got a look in! I decided to give it a go anyway, and obviously got a good response from Max as he is quite used to doing it.

Because of his age and arthritis problems, Eddy was much slower in comparison to Max, but he moved from the sitting position to lying down nicely. Once he was laid down, he took quite a bit of encouragement to get back up into the sitting position. I think he'll get the idea after a few more goes, but I was really pleased with him as it was his first attempt. As Bruce Forsyth would have said: "Didn't he do well!"

DAY 14

“NICE WORK MAX!”

I wasn't feeling at all tired last night, and foolishly stayed up until some unearthly hour. Both Eddy and Max were resting well and seemed very contented. Eventually I went to bed and managed to get a few hours' sleep. Once again though, I totally forgot to set my alarm for 7a.m., but I needn't have worried. I woke up to the familiar sound of Max's bell as he came into our bedroom and made a beeline for me. I checked the time. 7:07a.m. *Who needs an alarm clock?*

Su and I took the boys for a free-run at Tredegar Park in Newport this afternoon, as we hoped that it would help Eddy to adjust to having Max around that much more. As we let them free, Max started barking and bouncing around just like he did when we took the dogs free-running while on class last week. This time though, he was trying to get Eddy to play. Now that Eddy knows Max a little better, he seemed happy enough having this hyperactive youngster charging around all over the place, and even enjoyed some play-fighting with him. They were really getting on well, and it was great to see them having so much fun together. Sometimes, Max would spot a dog further away, run over to see it, have a few moments there, and then run back to be with Eddy, while at other times, they would head off together to see another dog.

We met a partially-sighted lady there with her pet German Shepherd, and she told us that she had just been on an assessment day at the Guide Dogs centre in Cardiff. She had a couple of concerns and wondered if I would mind chatting to her about them. I didn't mind in the slightest. She told me that the thought of a guide dog needing a minimum of 2 hours of exercise a day, every day, was of great concern to her, as her health problems simply wouldn't allow her to exercise two dogs for that length of time every day. I reassured her that her health conditions would be taken into consideration when they matched a dog with her, and that basically, a guide dog works when you need it to, and there isn't usually a set number of hours that it needs to have exercise. By the end of the conversation, she felt much better about things, and I encouraged her to phone the Guide Dogs centre to discuss her concerns with them, as they're in a far better position to be of help to her.

Eddy and Max then spotted a pack of dogs in the distance and ran ahead to meet them. As we got closer, Su noticed that they were all Huskies. We had a brief chat to one of the owners, and he told us that they had just been to their first Husky meet. Remembering that our next door neighbour's young son Aaron had thought Max was a Husky, Su could now appreciate why he said that as she could also see the similarities.

As we made our way back to the car, Eddy went into his 'I know you won't go without me' mode, and started hanging well back, aimlessly chewing on grass. It was obvious that all the calling, whistling, and shouting in the world wasn't going to make him budge. Suddenly, Max turned on the spot, ran over to him, circled him a few times, barked at him, and came back to us complete with Eddy in tow! *Nice work Max!*

Once we were back home, I made sure that the boys were given a thorough brushing because we'd planned another visit to Tafarn Ty Uchaf this evening. Even though the pub is right out in the middle of nowhere in a tiny village called Trefil, is surrounded by fields, roaming sheep, and piles of what sheep leave behind, we really didn't think Terry would appreciate dried mud or anything else for that matter on his carpet!

DAY 15

“WHAT A CLEVER BOY!”

We had another enjoyable time at Tafarn Ty Uchaf last night, and on arriving back home, I found no problem in falling asleep. What a refreshing change that was! The only problem was that, once again, I had forgotten to set the alarm for 7a.m! The method Max chose to wake me up was the same as he had used on Su the other morning, prodding me with his cold wet nose. On checking the time, I found it was just coming up to 8 o'clock, so it seemed neither of the boys were too bothered about breakfast. The weather this morning was abysmal, and no one in their right mind would have wanted to go out in it. As our next visit from Sarah isn't until tomorrow afternoon, it meant Max and I could at least have a chilled-out morning at home, while keeping warm and dry.

Su needed to take Eddy to the vet this afternoon as he has developed another ear problem. the poor lad has been very prone to them all his working life, but the ear wipes that Glenda from the Dog Welfare Team gave us some time ago have definitely helped minimise the frequency of him getting infections. While Su was out, she went to Argos to pick up a stair gate that Glenda suggested we put at the foot of the stairs. Unfortunately, it's slightly too wide for where it needs to go, so we have to take it back and get a smaller one. Why aren't things ever straight-forward?

I was delighted to receive a phone call from Max's puppy walker, Elaine Whiteley, at 4:30p.m. I had asked Sarah to pass on my phone number to her so that she could get in touch if she'd like to, but I really didn't expect to hear from her until Max and I had qualified. I've always felt that you can learn so much from your dogs' puppy walkers, they can be an invaluable source of information. We found it interesting that not only was Max the first German Shepherd Elaine had puppy walked, he was also the first German Shepherd that Sarah had completed the advanced training with, and he was the first German Shepherd that I've had. Added to that, he was the fourth puppy Elaine had walked, and he's my fourth guide dog.

I learned from Elaine that I needn't have concerned myself about how Max would treat Eddy's soft toys, as he loved the toys she had given him. One toy was a teddy that he cuddled up to and suckled on since he was just 6 weeks old. She named it “Sucky Bear,” and he loved it so much that he wouldn't go to bed without it, even when he was more grown up! Elaine told me that she'd sent his teddy bear along with him when he left her to go to the Leamington training centre. She had wondered if Sucky Bear had stayed with him all this time, and she asked me if he still had it. I had to tell her that, sadly, no, he didn't have it with him when he came to me. I felt a 'hunt the Sucky Bear' moment coming on, and E-mailed Max's boarder Sue to see if the teddy had got that far. She told me that he arrived without any toys, but that he had been happy to play with the toys that her own

dogs had. This included a squeaky duck which he became very fond of, and eventually de-squeaked. Do I feel brave enough to phone the Leamington training centre to see if they have a homeless Sucky Bear? Well, maybe not...!

As the weather was nice and dry this evening, Max and I went for a walk which combined three smaller sections of routes he had done last week into one complete route. It's a walk which takes us around the block, and is one I've done for many years with Eddy. The destination is the Mount pleasant pub, located at the opposite end of the block to where we live. It could be so easy to just come out of my front door, turn left and within a few moments be inside the pub, but by walking halfway to town, crossing over at the pedestrian crossing, and then working back up towards home, it means we get a good block walk. By the time I'd had something to eat and got myself ready, the evening was almost gone, and so it meant that Max and I were about to achieve something else, *our very first night-time walk*.

He didn't seem at all put off by the fact that we were out at night. I remember when I first did a night-time walk with Eddy, it felt very scrappy on occasions, and he bumped me into a few things. Max on the other hand made no such mistakes and the walk didn't feel scrappy at all! Max has been trained to find the box at controlled pedestrian crossings, and he's given a treat as a reward. We used this crossing last week when we introduced him to the route up to the care home where my dad lives, but that was in the daylight, and I wondered how he would cope with finding it in the dark. As we neared the crossing, I kept asking him to "*find the box*." He slowed down, and then stopped. I could sense something just in front of me, so I put my hand out, and there it was, the box on the post! *What a clever boy!* As I put my hand in my pocket for his treat, he swung his head up at me and started nudging me. I felt sure he was saying: "*There you are, you've got the box, come on dad where's my treat?*"

Max has worked past the Mount Pleasant quite a few times now, but has never been inside, in fact he has never been asked to find the door either. He really is a dog that wants to please, and I've noticed how excited he gets if we're doing something for the first time. I could sense the alertness as I asked him to "*find right to the door*." He swung smoothly to the right and was bang on target. He found their carpet of great interest, sniffing at it continuously while I sat there celebrating our safe arrival with a lovely cool refreshing pint of Tetley's Bitter.

DAY 16

“STEADY MAX...”

I remembered to set the alarm on my mobile phone last night! Miracles will never cease! Even though my alarm hadn't gone off the past few mornings, Max hadn't forgotten what it meant, and he promptly arrived at my bedside, eagerly anticipating his breakfast! The weather was on the cold side this morning, but at least it was dry. I gave Max a groom about 11 o'clock so that he was all nice and smart and ready for our afternoon training session with Sarah.

After discussing with her what I wanted to do on this particular walk, we began making our way to town. Initially, Max wasn't up to his usual standard, and he seemed to be looking for Sarah all the time. She said it could be him wondering why she's following us again as it's just been the two of us since last Friday. Thankfully, he soon settled back into his work, other than frequently rubbing his snoz on my leg in the hope that I'd take his Halti off. I had specifically asked if we could do some work around the Post Office, as there is now a shared surface in that area. Getting to the Post Office isn't so much of a problem, but heading back out from there towards the main street was of great concern as there is no kerb or tactile markings to indicate where the edge of the road is. Sarah quickly assessed the area, and decided to utilise the post box which is right on the end of the block of shops where I turn left to go to the Post Office. Max has been trained to find post boxes, and this was going to prove invaluable! As we made that left turn, Max automatically took me to the post box, even though I hadn't asked him to! We both gave him a lot of praise, and I rewarded him by giving him a treat. We continued into the Post Office, and then worked our way back towards the shared surface.

Keeping Max's speed nice and steady, I encouraged him to “*find the post*,” and he took me straight to the post box, and I gave him another fuss and treat for getting it right. I only use the word “post” so that it doesn't sound similar to when I ask him to “find the box” at a controlled pedestrian crossing. We walked him back a little way and worked him back towards the post box to reinforce what we wanted him to do. Once more, Max homed in on it without any hesitation! With no treats left in my pocket, we made up for it by giving him plenty of praise. What a wonderful marker that post box is, as I know if I ask him to find right from there, he'll take me along the building line on my right, keeping me well away from the shared surface.

There's been a great increase in the number of shared surfaces in towns and cities around the UK in recent years, which can pose a danger for blind and partially sighted people, as well as for children and the elderly. When I first found out that we had our own shared surface in Abertillery, I thought I wouldn't be able to safely work my guide dog into town. But with help from my wife Su, Sarah, and of course Max, I've managed to not only get over my fear of the shared surface, but I now feel able to work around at least some of that area with a degree of confidence.

As we made our way along the right-hand side of the street, we once again faced the

problem of shopkeepers and cafe owners who inconsiderately block up the pavement with all sorts of things, such as display stands, A-boards, and tables and chairs. As the weather was dry and sunny, Sarah and I decided to sit at one of those offending tables for a drink and chat before catching the bus home.

I knew that Su was taking Eddy for a walk to the Library this afternoon, and that she planned on getting the bus home from town. As we walked around the corner to the bus stops, Sarah spotted Su and Eddy waiting for the same bus we were going to catch. Both Eddy and Max got excited at seeing each other, and my repeated command, "*steady Max...*" fell totally on deaf ears.

Our next training session is Thursday afternoon when we'll be doing more work around the shared surface. So far, Max has only worked into town, but on that occasion, we'll be learning how to work back out of it which is really going to put him through his paces. Not only will he have to navigate the crossing on the Foundry Bridge that has no literal kerb for him to stop at, but he will have to cope with obstacles on the pavement which until now have been on his left-hand side. He is going to have to work hard to make sure he gets me safely through some tight spots and past tables and chairs outside the Coffee Bean on my right. I'm half expecting some minor bumps and brushes, but by keeping his speed down, he should get me through there without any serious mishaps. Or at least, that's what I'm hoping for!

DAY 17

“I'M SORRY MAX!”

It's great when you manage to have a good night's sleep, and that's exactly what I had last night. I woke up a few minutes before the usual time my alarm was set for, so I got up and started getting myself together. As I was drying my hands and face in the bathroom, my alarm went off, and within seconds, I heard one of my four-legged friends making his way upstairs. There's no two ways about it, Max definitely knows what that music means!

I had hoped to meet Su in the Coffee Shop this morning, but by the time she had been to her doctor's appointment, and then had been back to Argos to try and exchange the stair gate which ended up as a refund, the morning had gone. So, early in the afternoon, Max and I headed off to town to post some letters, and Su headed to town with Eddy a few minutes later, but we purposely went different ways so as not to distract Max. I chose to do a route Max had done a number of times, but in the opposite direction, and it was probably the worst decision I made today!

All was going well, until we came to the part on our street where the pavement gradually disappears. Max needs to go straight ahead, cross over a quiet lane, and then gently bear to the left to pick up the pavement again. For some reason, he was not happy doing that, and instead of finding the up-kerb, he chose to follow along the pavement edge by staying in the road. I kept his speed down, and kept encouraging him to *find left to the kerb* as I assumed that there must have been something there that made it awkward for him to guide me back onto the pavement.

In the end, I had to stop him where he was, make him do a left turn so that he was facing the kerb, and basically force him to get on the pavement. He wasn't at all happy about that, and as we went further along, he walked me quite firmly into a lamppost. Just as I did with the posts in Cardiff last weekend, I banged it with my hand while telling him "*no!*" I made him work back a few steps, and then approached the lamppost again. He very very cautiously moved ahead, but once safely past the lamppost, he somehow managed to walk me into the thick wire support that secures the lamppost in place. Three booboo's within two minutes? I wondered if he was having an off day. That seemed to be the end of it though, and apart from a little uncertainty as we swung around to the left to head towards the pedestrian crossing, he worked superbly from there on in.

With a doggy treat at the ready, I asked him to *find the box*, and he did, absolutely spot on! As we crossed the crossing, it felt to me as if he was going slightly too far to the left, so I corrected him gently, and encouraged him to go *straight*. Fair play, he did as I asked, and slowed down so that he could gently nudge me into the railing to show me that he was right in the first place! "*I'm sorry Max!*" I said, and then encouraged him to *find the way*. He sorted out the mess I had got us into, and we continued on our way to town.

He next had the opportunity to prove to me that he can find the post box when I need him to. We worked along the left-hand side of the shared surface, along to the end of the block of shops, crossed over and then headed back up on the other side until we came to the end of the block. "*Find the post Max*" I said, and he very confidently walked straight up to it. I gave him a lot of fuss and another treat, posted the letters, and then about turned to continue on through town. Max kept close to the building line on our right, keeping me well away from the shared surface. It really made me feel good that I can trust him to do a good job in quite an awkward spot in town!

Su and I enjoyed our time at the Coffee Shop, as there were a number of customers who wanted to ask lots of questions about Eddy and Max. On leaving, I needed to call into Barclays Bank, so that gave me the opportunity to introduce Max to another destination. Once that was sorted, we made our way to the bus stop to get a ride home. Max settled down very quickly, but Eddy seemed to have his awkward head on, and insisted on laying out right in the middle of the aisle, so that if anyone else got on the bus, they would have to step over him! He's got the most wonderful set of brakes, and if he doesn't want to move, he quite simply won't! I found a half a biscuit in my pocket, and with a little bit of bribery, we finally managed to get him sitting in a more suitable place!

We have another visit from Sarah tomorrow afternoon, and I'm planning on working that section again where I had those problems earlier today. I'm sure that with Sarah's help, he'll pick it up much easier, and feel more confident to work along that stretch of our street in the future. We will also be working back out of town, which I'm feeling somewhat nervous about because of that very poorly planned crossing on the Foundry Bridge. If yesterday is anything to go by though, I'm sure Sarah will have the key to making me feel much better about approaching the crossing from that direction. Who knows, maybe there's a landmark she'll be able to utilise to make things work much better. One thing is for sure, we'll find out tomorrow afternoon!

DAY 18

"I KNEW HE COULD DO IT!"

Yesterday evening, I'd been mulling over what might be the best way to arrive safely at the crossing at the top of town. Approaching it when heading into town isn't so much of a problem because Max has to slow down and swing right onto it, so that tells me we're there. I just make sure I can feel tactile paving slabs underfoot. Approaching the crossing as you head back up out of town though isn't so simple, and it's all too easy to walk out onto the roadway. There are tactile paving slabs that side as well, but there aren't enough of them, and you can step right over them in just two paces. Max reacts well to kerbs as a place to stop, even low ones, but for some reason or other street designers seem to have this thing of keeping everything at the same level. So, no kerb likely means no stop! I wasn't concerned about it to the extent that it stole my sleep, far from it; I felt sure Sarah would find the best and safest way to work around it.

After a good night's sleep and the now-expected reaction to my alarm, Max and I enjoyed yet another lazy morning. I gave Max a groom at about 11am, but for some reason Eddy wasn't at all interested in being groomed, so I let him be, and planned to try again later in the day. There were traffic problems in Llanelli late this morning, which meant that Sarah couldn't arrive on time for our afternoon training session. I knew there had to be a good reason for her late arrival, as she had been continually punctual for the past three weeks. She must have clocked up a colossal number of miles during that time, travelling back and fore between her home and Cardiff, Llanelli, Abertillery and Ebbw Vale. I'm so pleased I don't have to pay her fuel bill!

Because of the problems I had yesterday on a particular stretch of the route on the way to town, I asked Sarah if we could go that way so that she could give me any suggestions on how best to deal with them, which of course she was more than happy to do.

As we neared the section where the pavement runs out, I told her what had happened. Today, Max knew exactly what to do, and he crossed the top of the lane, edged over to the left, and took me straight to the up-kerb that he had avoided yesterday! *I knew he could do it!* Maybe having Sarah there gave him the extra bit of confidence he needed. To reinforce in his mind that he had just done it correctly, we gave him a lot of praise and a treat, then walked back a little way and asked him to work that section again. Once more he was bang on target! Brilliant! That was one out of three problems sorted.

He guided me cautiously along the next stretch as there were two lampposts on my right, but he worked past them without a problem. Just a metre or so before reaching the lamppost that my shoulder met with a bump yesterday, Max spotted a discarded take-away tray that still had chips and curry sauce in it. His nose went into red 1 alert and I knew I had to get his attention back on his work. Thankfully, he was very responsive to my command for him to *"leave it."* Sarah told me there was plenty of room to get past the lamppost, so why he should have walked me into it she really didn't know. Max inched his way ... well actually half-inched his way past it, and we stopped and gave him lots of

praise and a treat to reinforce that he'd done it correctly. We walked him back a little way and asked him to work that part once more. The chips and curry sauce were once again of great interest, but I managed to get his mind back on his work. Again, he moved very slowly forward, not as slow as last time though, and nicely edged past the lamppost. Two out of three sorted! We both gave him lots more praise, and then set off again ... well, for a few more paces anyway.

Sarah quickly grabbed my shoulder as she could see him taking me straight into the thick diagonal wire that supports the lamppost. We pointed it out to Max and followed it up with a very firm "No." Once more, we took a few paces back, and as we worked that part again, I kept his speed very steady, encouraging him to *keep left*, and again he responded well to what I asked him to do. Three out of three sorted!

As we neared the crossing at the top of town, I slipped my hand into my pocket to get a treat ready for when he stopped on the tactile paving. He noticed, stopped, and looked at me as if to say, "am I getting it now then?" "*No Max, find the way*," I told him, and sure enough, he did, and got his treat for stopping on the tactile paving. Just as he had tried to do yesterday – prior to me sticking my nose in where it wasn't wanted, he took me nice and straight across the crossing, gently swung to the right, crossed over, turned left, and we continued on our way down through town. While there, I had to pick up a prescription from Boots which gave Max another destination to add to his growing collection. As you get near to Boots, the pavement rises a little which is an excellent marker for me to know it's time to ask him to "*find left to the door*." Once that was dealt with, we decided to have a brief break in the Coffee Bean before heading back up to the top of town to tackle the awkward crossing. Until now, we've caught a bus home each time, but today we have to work our way home.

Sarah soon figured out the best way to find the crossing without stepping over onto the road, but it wasn't the way I thought she may have worked it out. Initially, she went ahead of us and stood at the Belisha beacon. As Max and I walked towards her, keeping his speed nice and steady while telling him to "*find the pole*," Sarah was excitedly tapping it and encouraging him to find it too. No problem! Max took me straight to it! Tons more praise, and, yes, yet another treat disappeared down his gullet! I told Sarah at this rate I'll be having to cut his food in half to compensate for all the treats! Once more, to reinforce what he needs to do at that point of the route, we took him back several paces and asked him again to *find the pole*. We did it several times to make sure he had it fixed firmly in his mind. He did, homing in on it beautifully each time. Brilliant! This really is a crossing that he needs to get right every single time we use it as it's potentially so dangerous!

We continued our way, up along the Foundry Bridge, where on our right-hand side at about head height is a huge iron support beam that runs the length of the bridge. Max was taking me far too close to it, so we went through the usual procedure of pointing it out to him, telling him "*no*," and then making sure that as we set off, he kept further to the left. He worked really well the rest of the way home, and both Sarah and I were more than happy with how Max had responded to all the situations we needed to deal with.

As I spent the evening relaxing at home, I couldn't help but feel very satisfied with our work that afternoon. With Sarah's help we had solved the problems along my street which was good enough in itself, but to have worked out such a practical way of safely using my most hated crossing in town was absolutely awesome! What I need to remember now is not to get into the habit of catching the bus home each time I go to town. It was something I'd been doing on a regular basis with Eddy as he was suffering from arthritis, and the walk into town was an ideal distance for him. He loved travelling on buses, so to get a bus home from town every time was something he really enjoyed, and it meant that his legs didn't have too much work to do. Now, though, with a spritely young German Shepherd at my side, there's no reason why I can't walk home from town as well. Of course, that will also have the added benefit of keeping his mind tuned in to finding that all-important crossing pole for me!

DAY 19:
“YOU'VE QUALIFIED ... CONGRATULATIONS!”

Toward the end of the training period with a guide dog, the team know beyond any doubt whether the dog and its owner are ready to do their qualification walk. In the case of Max and I, today was the big day! Sarah had asked me if I had a preferred destination that I'd like to use for our walk, and I chose the Coffee Shop in the centre of town. She asked if I'd consider Marenghi's Cafe in the Arcade instead, as it would mean that Caroline Viney, who currently qualifies all the Guide Dog partnerships trained by the Cardiff team, would be able to see Max and I work even further through town. I was more than happy with her suggestion, and the thought of another Marenghi's bacon roll brought a smile to my face!

It had been just a normal morning, nothing out of the ordinary, other than anticipating a phone call from Sarah around 12:30pm. I received a text message from David just after 11:15am letting me know that he and Robyn had just qualified. This meant that Sarah and Caroline were now on their way over to us. I was thrilled for David of course, but at the same time it threw me into a panic as it meant that Sarah and Caroline would possibly be arriving in Abertillery almost an hour earlier than expected! At just before 11:45am, my mobile rang. It was Sarah. “You can set off to town when you're ready, we'll follow you in the car from a distance,” she told me. I was still all flummoxed and blurted out: “I didn't expect to hear from you just yet, I'm not ready.” She explained that they'd made good time with David, and apologised for being early. She told me not to worry, and to just get myself together and head off when we were ready. She said it wasn't a problem, and they weren't in a rush. It was just as well!

I don't know how long I kept them waiting, but I used the loo, had a wash, brushed my teeth, combed my hair, then put Max out the garden to make sure he was comfy as well, got my coat on, put my high-vis vest on over it so that Sarah and Caroline could spot me more easily, put Max's halti and lead on him, then his harness, dug around in my pocket to make sure I had a front door key, and then we finally headed out. As I was locking the door, it suddenly dawned on me that I didn't have any treats for Max. I stood there thinking over the route we were going to do, and realised that I wouldn't actually need any.

I had a sneaky suspicion that Max knew Caroline and Sarah were around somewhere because as I was trying to set off to the right of my house, he was equally as determined to go left! Could he pick up their scent? Did he glance around and spot the Guide Dogs car? I didn't have a clue, but after a few attempts, he finally gave in, and we headed off in the direction I wanted to go.

Max and I have done this route several times, with and without Sarah 'stalking' us. He knows this route well, but there are still one or two areas where he sometimes doesn't get it quite right. I chose not to dwell on that, but to just enjoy our walk, and deal with any problems if or when they happen. The crossing behind our house wasn't too busy today, although we still had to wait for quite a while until the road was clear. Max seemed to be glancing back from time to time, and I couldn't help wondering if he had spotted Sarah

and Caroline in their car.

Once we were on the other side of the road, we turned right and followed along the school playing fields. One section Max sometimes doesn't quite get right is the wide entrance to the school. On occasions, he has reached the pavement the other side but has wandered too far to the right. So, rather than me walking neatly down the pavement, I've slipped off the kerb to my right. But he got it right today, so I asked him to *stand*, and gave him a lot of praise. As we reached the pedestrian crossing, he took me straight to the box even though I didn't ask him to find it. With no treats in my pocket, he had to make do with lots of praise and a cuddle.

When we first began working this route, it took Max a few times to get his directions right for following around the school's bus bay. He used to bear a little too far left in the early days and end up on the path leading into the school. Until recently, I'd take his lead in my right hand and encourage him to "follow right." Bit by bit, he's been getting far better at it, and today he followed around to the right very nicely indeed. A little further on is a car parking bay. I later found out that Caroline and Sarah had parked there, and were ducking down in their seats in the hope that Max wouldn't notice them!

As we headed over the Foundry Bridge, it felt as though he was getting way too excited about something ahead. I asked him to "stand" for a minute or so, gave him a fuss, and we then headed off once again. Max handled the crossing to the shared surface really well, staying to the left to follow along the shop fronts. He was really eager to go in the Coffee Bean, but I told him "*not today*," and he carried on through town. He next tried cutting over to the right for the Coffee Shop, but again I had to tell him "*not today*." I was half expecting him to try going into Boots as he'd been there yesterday, but he carried straight on past. Crossing over from Eileen Jenkins' Florist wasn't as easy as it should have been, because a truck had been parked directly opposite us. As we crossed the road, Max slowed down, quickly weighed up the situation, and decided to go behind the lorry to get to the kerb. That was another nice bit of work, which I was later told also included avoiding a motorbike that was parked up right behind the truck. On the up-kerb, we turned right and headed towards the Arcade. Was able to sense the Arcade's open entrance, but I encouraged Max to go a few steps further. We did a "back" turn followed by a "right" turn and he headed straight into the Arcade. I could again feel his eagerness, but at least this time I had a fairly good idea of what it was about. I noticed him look to the right into a shop doorway, and then correct himself as he realised it wasn't the right one. Just a few more paces and he swung right and took me straight up to Marengi's door, where I gave him lots of praise and cuddles. He had worked superbly today, I couldn't fault him, and I just hoped that Sarah and Caroline felt the same!

As the three of us sat at the table enjoying our drinks and bacon rolls, we began chatting about the walk in general. We all agreed that Max had worked superbly, how his pace had been lovely and relaxed, and how he had shown great caution on some tight spots in town. They were in full agreement, and Caroline spoke the words I longed to hear: "*You've qualified ... congratulations!*"

There was just one issue Caroline wanted to discuss with me, and that was a slight posture problem I have. She noticed that I'm tending to face in towards Max slightly, and she told me to be aware of it and to make a conscious effort to keep my right shoulder tucked back. I commented that once or twice on the walk, I'd noticed that my left foot had just clipped Max's right front paw, and we both agreed that this was an ideal reminder for me to straighten up a bit.

Caroline then got all the paperwork ready, and I signed the contract. As a legality, guide dog owners are required to make a token payment of just 50 pence for their dog. I willingly handed it over to Caroline, along with a donation to Guide Dogs for the Blind that Su and I had agreed on. Caroline then began going through all the various bits and pieces that are in the qualification pack, such as the "Your Help Appreciated" card that we can carry with us and use when we need some sighted assistance. Caroline jokingly said she finds them handy at hen parties as you can go up to a crowded bar and get served far more quickly! There were also other things, like cards that explain to a cafe or restaurant owner that working guide dogs are allowed in such establishments. There was also a hi-vis "Please Do Not Feed Me" tag to be put on Max's collar, and a very nice "Guide Dog Owner" badge that I can wear with pride. She next went through some general information, such as who to contact if there's a problem with equipment, or who to contact about dog health issues. If I have any problems with Max's working ability, or find myself struggling on certain routes, then for the next year I'm to contact Sarah, after which Max and I will be handed over to the Guide Dogs Mobility Instructor who covers our area. Caroline confirmed that our class will be going back to the Park Inn North hotel for a few days in January, so that's something I'm really looking forward to! She also told me we'll be having several after-care visits from Sarah, the first being in a few weeks' time.

I just couldn't wait to tell Su and my family and friends the wonderful news that Max and I had just qualified! Of course, a celebratory meal was in order, and Su and I once again chose to go to Tafarn Ty Uchaf in Tredegar, as we can take both dogs there. I somehow had a strange feeling that our poor Eddy was not at all happy with us celebrating his nose having been put out of joint!