

**Read
and
Respond**
A Text/Anthology
Fourth Edition

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Narrative Essay

ME AND MY SHADOW

by Cathy Anne Murtha

“Paws for Independence” is the motto of Southeastern Guide Dogs of Central Florida. These words carry special meaning for me. They signify the freedom and sense of independence that I now hold within my heart and exhibit on a daily basis through the assistance and companionship of my best friend, my guide dog, Shadow. Meeting Shadow in the living room of Southeastern Guide Dogs was one of the most memorable moments of my life. The frisky little black Lab that leapt into my arms three years ago has become an invaluable friend to me. When we first met, I could not imagine how that little bundle of energy could possibly settle down into a competent working dog. She managed to push all my fears aside the first time I took the leather handle of her harness in my hand. Shadow, four years old, has continued to amaze me throughout our two years of working together. We are best friends and constant companions.

The sense of excitement in the spacious living room of Southeastern Guide Dogs was palpable on that sultry August day in 1993. Twelve blind students from all walks of life and all regions of the United States were about to experience great change. We were not to understand the special bond that would be created or how much pleasure we would derive from these incredible animals until much later. At that moment, all we could feel was a sense of overwhelming anticipation.

One by one the dogs were brought into the room. We could hear the toenails skittering on the linoleum of the hall as the trainers struggled to control the dogs’ excitement. It was hard to believe, but it was very possible—they were almost more excited than we were. The trainers tried valiantly to maintain a sense of dignity about the occasion; however, as more dogs entered the room, the party atmosphere overwhelmed one and all. Wet noses were thrust into our surprised faces, greetings and doggy kisses were offered by the four-legged bundles of energy, and happy tails thwapped our faces. Laughter spread throughout the room. Golden Retrievers, smooth-coated Collies, and German Shepherds dragged their trainers into the room. As the trainers handed the leashes to the appropriate students, the greetings began. The dogs really didn’t care whom they were saying “hi” to; it seemed like ev-

everyone was catching a wet tongue on his face or having the air whooshed from his lungs by an eager pup who wanted to be the center of attention.

I sat on the sofa, listening to the excitement, remembering a similar moment seven years previous when I had received my first guide dog, a rambunctious black lab named Coral. I remembered the sense of awe and wonder that filled me. I felt that feeling returning. I listened for my name to be called. Because I was a returning graduate, I had a feeling I would be one of the last to receive my dog. My heart was beating faster as I waited, trying to be patient, trying to control the sense of excitement that would not be quelled. Finally, I heard my name announced. I heard the words “Black Labrador” and a name . . . “Shadow.” Suddenly there was a cold nose on my hand, a velvet ear, a sleek black body and a ferociously waving tail. Two paws were planted firmly in my lap; Shadow and I were nose to nose. She sniffed me gently; I felt my hands wrap around her strong neck; I held her close. I murmured her beautiful name over and over again, “Shadow.” Tears welled in my eyes. I had missed having a dog in my life since having to retire Coral. Coral had developed epilepsy and had gone to live with a good friend of mine. I wondered if I would be able to enjoy more years with Shadow. I felt trepidation creep over me, but I thrust it aside! I let the tears fall and decided that Shadow was mine; we would be together for a very long time!

Just as a mother checks on a newborn baby, later that night I found myself creeping to the bottom of my bed, reaching over to feel my dog. I would usually be met with a moist nose and the happy thump of Shadow’s tail against the floor. I am not sure, to this day, why I felt that need to check on her. Perhaps I wanted to be sure she was real, or that she was okay, or that she was really there. I only know that I felt a sense of wonder and satisfaction each time she was there, breathing softly and curled in her customary little ball.

The next day the other students and I assembled in the sun porch and waited for our turn to work our dogs for the first time in harness. I decided not to anticipate my moment, but to enjoy those of my companions. One by one they left the sun porch; I could feel their sense of doubt; many had come to the school expecting something but had no real concept of what a guide dog could do. They had gone through the interviews, had many meetings during the previous three days, but this was the moment that would tell them that their lives were about to change. They left the porch not knowing what to expect; they were hopeful, but the skepticism was in their voices and actions. At that moment, their companions were just dogs—wonderful, frisky creatures—but they had no concept of the miraculous changes that would take place when the harnesses were snapped beneath their dogs’ chests. It was not possible to convey the experience to students who had not yet worked their

dogs; words like incredible, wonderful, and freedom tumbled out. Freedom, the word hung in the air; I felt it swirling through my mind when I was called to bring Shadow to the work area. I rose from my chair. Shadow heeled perfectly. My head was in a daze; my fingers caressed the soft leather of the harness that was slung over my shoulder. I wondered if our relationship would be as good as Coral's and mine. I had returned to cane travel three months before arriving at Southeastern. Now the moment had come to welcome a new companion into my life. I was afraid of making comparisons, afraid that I would not give Shadow a fair chance, afraid that I would be disappointed.

The harness slid over Shadow's wriggling head; as I buckled it into place, her nose touched my face; a gentle sniff was offered. I patted her gently on the head and ran my hand down the length of her body. Her tail was wagging, not with the enthusiasm of a puppy, but with self-assurance. When the chest strap was buckled into place, Shadow was transformed. She was a working Guide Dog and knew it! I stood beside her, the harness held loosely in my left hand, the leash looped through two fingers; I gave the command: "Forward!" Words cannot express what I experienced at that moment. I thought it would be the same as the first time I picked up Coral's harness, but it wasn't. It was so much more! Shadow strode out with confidence. I could feel the wind in my face and listen to the birds singing high in the trees. I felt the sun shining down on us as we strode down the sidewalk. I no longer worried about running off a curb or having to listen for pedestrians. I remember wondering if that was how a sighted person felt as he strode down the sidewalk. In that moment all the fears I had been trying to push aside left me. I silently apologized to Shadow for my doubts and began to talk to her. I told her what a good dog she was, how special she was, and what a wonderful job she was doing. I felt the first of many acknowledgments that were to follow. Shadow turned slightly and bumped her soft muzzle gently against my knee. This is a signal that Shadow continues to use today. If I am not talking enough, if I don't acknowledge an especially great aversion quickly enough, if I don't know that she has just walked around a gaping hole in the sidewalk and saved me from tumbling head-long into a chasm filled with jagged chunks of concrete, I will feel the familiar, gentle nudge and know that I have been negligent in my responsibilities.

Shadow has proven to be an exceptional working dog. This is not only due to the excellent training she received at Southeastern Guide Dogs, but also to the family that gave her the love and training she needed as a puppy. Shadow is secure in any environment. She handles even the most treacherous of obstacles with self-confidence and pride. She is a gentle and loving creature whose only desire is to please me and receive the acknowledgment she deserves. Meeting Shadow and welcoming her

into my life was an experience that will never be repeated, but each time I pick up the harness and command her to go forward, I feel the Florida sun and hear birds. I remember our first walk and think of the word that best describes our relationship, the word that swam in my head on the humid August day—freedom.

ADDENDUM

Shadow wears a sign that says, “Do Not Pet Me. I am a Southeastern Guide Dog.” Since many are tempted to pet or embrace her, it is important to stress the rules about not petting guide dogs. Guide dogs in public should never receive attention of any kind, not even a “hello” without permission of the guide dog user. Petting, feeding, calling and approaching a guide dog should absolutely never be done. These are working dogs, trained to be attentive to their job, and they should not be distracted even with the kindest of intentions.

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