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A Synthesized Last Word

September 2011 I will have ticked off 10 years working at the University of Western Australia (UWA); for me, a stimulating, rewarding and diverse workplace. I am part of that diversity. Retinitis Pigmentosa reduced my sight to a point where I have embraced blindness over the past 20 years.

Work goes on though! The job puts me at the point of contact for 2 centers; the Center for Legumes in Mediterranean Agriculture and the Future Farm Industries CRC. Duties include front end contact, administrative support and generally keeping the CRC wing at FNAS running smoothly.

Largely I depend on good access to UWA’s computer based intranet, and access to the outside world via the internet. To do this I use what is known as a screen reading program; in particular a software package called “Job Access with Speech” or more commonly known as JAWS. Using keyboard commands to navigate around applications, the software, using synthetic speech, voices what is on the computer screen. This gives me access to the information I need to do the job. Reading printed material is sometimes a bit of a barrier; getting around that with the use of another software package, “Kurzweil”, a text to speech scanning program, allowing me to scan and read printed material, again via a synthesized voice. For example, I use it to scan, read and distribute the mail for the 2 centers. Apart from those 2 software packages, my faithful Braillenote note taker and a bit of Braille labeling around the office that is pretty much it for adaptive equipment.

I do have an assistant, my guidedog Nicholas. Nicholas has been with me about 6 months now. Nicholas is my second guidedog; and still learning the trickier skills of good guiding. Our 3km walk into work each day is nice training, he is really coming along, apart from a bit of dog distraction; and sometimes he gets mixed up and thinks he is a guard dog and not a guidedog. He has certainly given a few people a fright with his loud booming bark as they casually walked past the office door.

Getting around campus with a new guidedog can be a bit of a challenge. The big wide walkways sometimes confuse a guidedog looking for a logical path of travel. Trying to pick up clues as to where to turn off, and give Nicholas some guidance for the first couple of trips on a new route, takes a fair bit of focus and reliance on environmental queues. The direction of the breeze, taking bearings from the sounds of air conditioning units on buildings and picking up pedestrian flows via the sound of chatter and laughter as various groups walk by, all come into play. Recently, what was to be a quick 15 minute walk to the Guild Village, turned into a 2 hour discovery tour to all parts of the university.

Pollock, my previous guidedog, spent just about his entire working life at UWA and knew exactly where we were going, probably before I’d even decided where. He did have 10 years experience under his collar. Sadly Pollock past away in February; His ashes are scatted beneath the paving of a new seating area in front of the CRC wing, Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

Outside of work, I keep busy volunteering for various disability agencies, sitting on the boards of People with Disability WA, Association for the Blind of WA, Blind Citizens Australia, Blind Citizens WA, Ministerial Advisory Council on Disability and the Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee at UWA.

Knowledge gathered whilst on these boards and advisory councils gives me an opportunity to pass on information on barriers faced by people with a disability, and feed it into the university’s own knowledge base through the Equity and Diversity Advisory committee. In turn, improving access to UWA and its facilities so everyone can enjoy their UWA experience.

Greg Madson