

CASE STUDIES



Four personal accounts of living with vision loss and how a guide dog has helped achieve freedom and independence

Kirk Watson

Northern Beaches resident and veteran Sydney to Hobart sailor Kirk Watson knows exactly why it's important to contact an organisation like Guide Dogs NSW/ACT when you first start experiencing issues with your sight.

While Kirk was shattered that he might have to give up his love of surfing and being on the water when he was diagnosed with the inherited, degenerative eye condition Retinitis Pigmentosa at 16, now, aged 38, he admits he left it too long before seeking help from Guide Dogs NSW/ACT to stay mobile and independent.

For about 15 years, Kirk got by using what was left of his sight until he rapidly lost most of his central vision around eight years ago, when he first sought help from Guide Dogs.

"I would stumble down the street trying to get my bearings, and looking at things in the shadows that weren't there," says Kirk, who works in Sydney's CBD as a public servant. *"I got myself into some embarrassing situations.*

"Personally, I left it too late, to the point where I was putting myself in danger. It was a hard thing to overcome being identified with having a vision condition... it caused a lot of stress at the time.

"Having a guide dog has meant freedom and independence. I am able to leave somewhere when I want without having to wait for someone else to take me."

Kirk received his first guide dog Tiller, who he named after his love of sailing, six years ago, after mastering how to use the cane. He has since competed in the Sydney-to-Hobart race eight times, sails his own yacht and volunteers for sailing with disabled children.

Beth White

Mother of three young children, Beth White from North Rocks, understands the need to educate people experiencing problems with their vision about seeking help sooner rather than later to stay mobile and independent.

Beth has gradually been losing her sight since she was five years old due to the inherited, degenerative eye condition Retinitis Pigmentosa. During her teenage years and early 20s, Beth found it incredibly difficult to adjust to being different and having a vision condition.

Once she accepted her situation though and sought help from Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, including receiving her guide dog Teena, Beth's world has opened up and she's never looked back. Beth is currently studying to become a massage therapist.

"I left it to a dangerous point before I sought help to be honest. I felt very differently about it then," says Beth. *"I really resisted any support and it took a long time for me to accept it was happening. But I have since realised that there are some things in life we can't change, and it is so important to make the most of what we have.*

"The independence I have gained from receiving help from Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, especially my guide dogs, is life changing for me and my family. Sam, my seven-year-old son, has the same condition that I do, and he is receiving help now from Guide Dogs that will help to set him up for life."

Martin Z'Graggen

A successful international chef, Martin Z'Graggen's world came to a crashing halt when he lost most of his sight to glaucoma at just 38.

While it hasn't been easy adjusting to his life without sight, Martin sought help early from Guide Dogs NSW/ACT and now thanks to his guide dog Kaylah, the father of two is back to living an independent life.

Last year he competed in the City2Surf to raise funds for Guide Dogs, and is planning on doing it again this year together with his family.

"Losing my sight was a life changing experience," says Martin. "It hasn't been easy and it does take its toll on your mental status as well."

"As well as my guide dog, all the excellent services I have received from Guide Dogs NSW/ACT and the wonderful support from my wife and kids, it has really helped me to stay connected with the community, so I don't just stay at home and do nothing."

In order to stay in contact with his culinary friends and colleagues (overseas) he learnt how to use the internet and appreciates the social networking media.

Leonie Wolff

Frightened to leave the house because of her failing sight in her early 20s, Matraville resident Leonie Wolff took action and wouldn't even let a fear of dogs stop her from achieving independence.

Now with her second guide dog, Desiree, the mother of two young children runs her own psychology practice and encourages anyone in her situation to seek help early to maintain independent mobility and a quality of life.

"Losing my sight was a big shock and it felt like it was the end of the world," says Leonie, who lost her sight gradually to the inherited, degenerative eye condition, Retinitis Pigmentosa.

"It does get you down at times, it can be very frustrating, especially because I used to be able to see and know what I am missing out on. Sometimes I think to myself, 'I just wish I could see that'.

"But since having a guide dog it has really helped me. I used to be really scared to go anywhere, to the point where I didn't want to leave the house, but when I received my guide dog, I got my independence back and I was free - I could just go anywhere I wanted by myself."

Leonie has been receiving orientation and mobility training from Guide Dogs NSW/ACT since she was 16, when her eyesight deteriorated to such an extent that she had trouble getting around.