

# Gillette woman bonds with her new Seeing Eye dog

By DENIS J. KELLY, Editor

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## LONG HILL TWP. –

Joyce Pratt of Gillette gushes with praise every time she talks about her new guide dog, Kia, a Black Labrador retriever from The Seeing Eye, Morristown.

### **Kia has become her constant companion.**

Pratt is legally blind due to Retinitis Pigmentosa, which allows her very limited sight. She described her sight as like looking through the core of a toilet paper roll, and, in her case, the hole is becoming progressively smaller. In addition, what she does see is smoky.

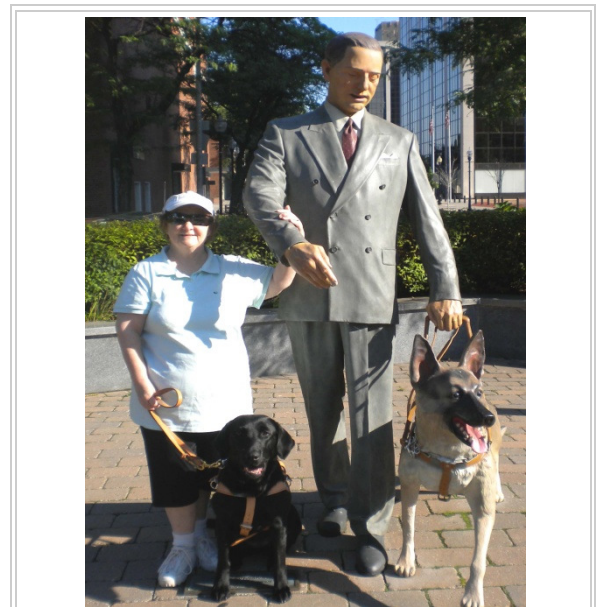
She said can still see the headlines of the **Echoes-Sentinel**, and has the aid of devices that magnify print on a closed circuit TV for use while reading labels and prescription bottles. She also uses a special computer with large fonts and high contrast colors.

However, Kia will give her much more freedom of movement.

"Now with Kia, I can go anywhere I want," she said.

She anticipates being able, for example, to walk to the home of her in-laws, who live nearby in Gillette. She hopes to be able to walk to the shopping center at 600 Valley Road, Gillette, to get to the post office, restaurants and shops there.

She is also looking forward to going out to Las Vegas to visit with her family.



Joyce Pratt of Gillette, and her new Seeing Eye dog, Kia, left, stand next to the statue of depicting a man with a Seeing Eye dog just off the Morristown Green. Pratt worked with Kia during a 26-day training regimen at the Seeing Eye, including a trip into New York City, where Pratt said Kia performed like he had always lived in the city. She is thrilled, and hopes that having Kia will enable her to have more independence to move about.

## Guide Dog Training

The experience of going through the metal detectors at an airport and traveling with Kia on an airplane were all covered in the guide dog training she and Kia went through from July 18 through Aug. 11 at the Seeing Eye campus in Morristown.

The last two days of training, Wednesday, Aug. 12, and Thursday, Aug. 13, took place at the Stony Point Conference Center, Stony Point N.Y.

Joyce and her husband, Gary, have been volunteers for the past eight months at the front desk of Stony Point Center, a conference center and retreat house in northern Rockland County operated by the Presbyterian Church. The Pratts are parishioners at Trinity United Church, Warren Township, a joint congregation of the United Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Christ.

The final two days of training at the conference center was to help both Mrs. Pratt and Kia become acclimated there.

The recommendation is that new guide dog owners should remain in the same environment for the first six weeks or so. However, when the Pratts return to their home in Gillette at the completion of the volunteer assignment at Stony Point, trainers from The Seeing Eye will come to their home to help acclimate Mrs. Pratt and Kia to that location.

Kia is two years and three months old, and unless there are extenuating circumstances, Kia could be with Mrs. Pratt for 10 years. Most Seeing Eye dogs first go to a “puppy family,” at about four months, and stay with that family typically for a year and a half, before spending about four months on the campus at The Seeing Eye, undergoing obedience training, Pratt said.

Pratt applied for a dog back in December, and after being accepted, the initial estimate was that it would not be until the end of August until a match could be found. She said The Seeing Eye takes its time to make sure that they match the right dog with the right person, because the two might be together 24/7 for 10 years. Then she got the call to ask if she could be ready to start training with Kia on July 18. She said yes.

During training, trainers are assigned to work with about four to five students and their dogs. The dogs are already on a schedule to be “walked” four times a day, at 5:30 and 11 a.m., and 4:30 and 8 p.m. They are also fed twice a day. So Pratt started the routine of the four walks and two feedings. She also learned how to deal with escalators at the Bridgewater Mall as well as elevators, and revolving doors. The trainers used the streets in Morristown, including near the Morristown Green, to practice dealing with crossing busy streets. They used the courthouse security system to simulate the security systems they may encounter at an airport. The students and their dogs went to supermarkets and department stores. At the Seeing Eye, they became accustomed to computer rooms, laundry rooms, fitness gyms, and the seats typical on an airplane. While flying, Kia will be with Pratt right at her seat. Pratt and Kia went to New York City for a half-day. Pratt recalled that in the city, Kia did her job as if she had always been in the city. “Kia was amazing,” Pratt said. “Sometimes she’d get stuck behind slow people, and helped steer me to go around them. She dealt with manhole covers, and crossing busy streets. She is so smart. She is amazing.” Pratt said that training in and around the Morristown Green has been helped by the fact that the Seeing Eye now has a small lounge nearby. Students and their dogs can wait in the lounge for their turn for one-on-one training with the trainers. It’s much more relaxing than the previous arrangement, which was waiting in a van.

## **Radical Hospitality**

Pratt said that Stony Point believes in what it calls “radical hospitality.” Everyone there is very friendly. At Stony Point, the Pratts help to register guests, and provide for the needs of conferences as needed.

Mrs. Pratt said the facility is interfaith and intercultural, has a quiet campus with beautiful grounds, and like Trinity United Church, has a prayer labyrinth.

In July, the Rev. Lise Worthington, who is the chef of the Gilmor Sloane House at Stony Brook, offered a multi-course meal at Trinity as part of a program called, "Biblical Feasting" Eating the Bible One Scripture Bite at a Time."

Pratt said when she and her husband started volunteering there, the original agreement was for three months of service, but somehow, they have been there for eight. They tend to get down to Gillette about once a month. As nice as it is in Stony Point, however, Pratt said she is looking forward to getting out to Las Vegas to see her family, and then getting back to Gillette. She said that at the end of one of the conferences at Stony Point, the conferees started asking her questions about Kia and the proper way to approach a Seeing Eye dog. She called it the dos and the don'ts. She was there a half-hour answering all the questions, and she said she'd be happy to do the same at school, civic organization meetings and businesses who want to ask similar questions.

These days, Pratt also can't say enough good things about the Seeing Eye and Kia.