



partners
Guide Dogs of America | Tender Loving Canines



CARVING A NEW PATH:

Judo Athlete Priscilla Gagné & GDA | TLC Pup Zophia

As a visually impaired Judo athlete, Priscilla Gagné never relied on a guide dog, though she was the proud owner of a German Shepherd Lab, Sergeant Tango. When Tango neared the end of his life in early 2023, Priscilla decided it was time to get a formally trained service dog.

"Making the jump from white cane to guide dog was a no-brainer," Priscilla explains. Montreal's three-year waiting list for service dogs led her to consider international options. Based in Southern California, Guide Dogs of America | Tender Loving Canines became her choice. "I knew it would take three weeks to train," says Priscilla. "If I'm going to spend three weeks somewhere, I knew I wanted it to be California."

The application process validated Priscilla's decision. "Within a week or two of contacting GDA | TLC, I got confirmation I was approved and accepted. Not even a week later, I got a call telling me they had a match," she says. "They wanted me to come just two days after a competition in Egypt. The timing was divine."

LEARNING TO TRUST ZOPHIA

In March 2023, Priscilla flew to Los Angeles and met her match, Zophia. She had to learn how to use the harness and give commands before meeting her new companion.

"When we finally got our dogs, they wanted us to be with them and feel the harness," recalls Priscilla. "I walk really fast and so does Zophia. They matched us so well. I had one hand on her harness and the other up in front of my body — we call it a bumper."

"Our trainer, Sean, kept telling me to trust my dog, but even when I put my hand down, it was flexed. I was so tense." The first hurdle was learning to trust Zophia. Priscilla adapted quickly in Los Angeles but faced new challenges back home in Montreal.

"In Montreal, it took two weeks for both of us to be comfortable with each other," says Priscilla. "Dogs don't always recognize flat

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Greetings,

We are well into the second half of the year and progressing steadily. I'm thrilled about what's ahead, including two more graduations and our annual Las Vegas Charity Weekend in November!

I'd like to wish you and your family a happy summer. As always, we are grateful to all of you for your support in the growth and future of this organization. Together, we are transforming lives.

Sincerely,

Russell Gittlen

Russell Gittlen, President
GDA|TLC



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"When playing goalball, I missed the combativeness of wrestling. The closest thing to wrestling in the Paralympics was Judo," explains Priscilla. "Plus, in wrestling you can't do real submissions — chokes and arm locks — but in Judo you can. That was appealing to me."

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curbs as curbs." The trainers' reminder that the training would continue at home proved true. The solution? Treats!

Zophia lived up to her training, proving to be an intelligent, trainable, and affectionate companion. "Every day, she amazes me," says Priscilla. "She never ceases to surprise me with her intellect. Before I go to bed, I give her a hug and kiss and thank her for helping me. She sleeps in my bed every night."

GDA | TLC set up Priscilla and Zophia for success, providing a foundation of trust and excellence. "The staff, the trainers, and everyone involved did an amazing job to help us feel completely welcomed and safe," says Priscilla.

"They did a great job teaching us how to work with our dogs." GDA | TLC also exceeded Priscilla's expectations with their tact during training and careful follow-up post-training.

"They have so much respect," says Priscilla. "They also do close follow-up once you go home so that they know their dog is in good hands. Their dogs have been treated well."

A PERFECT PARTNER FOR JUDO PRACTICE

Priscilla, a former high school wrestler and goalball player on the National Team, is a skilled athlete. When she discovered Judo, she found a grappling sport included in the Paralympics.

Priscilla joined the Canadian National Team in 2014 and competed in the 2015 Rio Paralympics. She has traveled to Turkey, Germany, Uzbekistan, Great Britain, Egypt, and more, competing in this sport requiring a unique blend of timing, strength, and deep concentration.

Competing as a Paralympic Judo athlete in Canada can be challenging. Montreal's small, integrated training system means para-Judo athletes train with able-bodied National Team athletes. Historically, Priscilla had to leave Tango at home, which was difficult, and finding a partner was challenging.

"Initially, it was so discouraging. People don't always want to practice with someone who is visually impaired," explains Priscilla. "We don't see the fluidness of their movements, and the rules are different. We always start with a grip, we always have to have two hands on, and you can't block a hand. In regular Judo, none of that stuff goes."

However, going to practice with Zophia has changed everything. Navigating busy Montreal, with its heavy vehicle and foot traffic, bicycle lanes, and metro, is taxing. But walking with Zophia eases that burden and makes it more motivating to go to training. "She knows where we're going," says Priscilla. "I can ask her to find a door or the stairs in the metro, and she finds it. I don't need to ask for help anymore. She breezes through obstacles."

"It takes a lot of energy to navigate this city. Zophia makes navigation one less thing I need to think about."

—Priscilla Gagné



with minor injuries or disappointments, but they immediately light up when they see Zophia."

Zophia also serves as a great conversation starter. "People ask me how she helps me," says Priscilla. "It brings a lot of awareness, even to the younger generation." Bringing Zophia to practice has made the whole process smoother and more enjoyable. "It's so much easier," says Priscilla.

Priscilla will compete in Paris in the fall of 2024 and will retire from Judo as a National Team athlete. "I've thoroughly enjoyed this journey, and I have no regrets. Having said that, I am definitely ready for the next step in my life," explains Priscilla.

Whatever that next step may be, Zophia will be at her side. 🐾

A SERENDIPITOUS JOURNEY: Chanel Stewart's Path to Puppy Raising and Service

Actress-model Chanel Stewart hadn't had a dog since she was a child, but when she moved to Los Angeles from Australia in 2020 that all changed. Soon she became a Puppy Raiser for GDA | TLC.

Having previously worked in orphanages and building homes in Bali and Cambodia, Chanel was looking for somewhere to volunteer. However, COVID-19 made volunteering difficult. "I was trying to apply for things, and no one was taking anything because of potential contact with the virus," explains Chanel. "I couldn't work with humans."

The solution? Puppies!

Chanel had been thinking about working with guide and service dogs ever since a serendipitous moment in the doctor's office. "One day, I walked into the doctor's appointment, and sitting in the waiting room was a guide dog with an owner," says Chanel. "I knew it was a sign. That night, my fiancé Dan and I signed up to be Puppy Raisers."

After going through the application process, Chanel and Dan received their eight-week-old puppy in November 2020. She was a black lab-retriever mix and Chanel's heart was immediately stolen. Following the naming convention of the litter, Chanel chose the Hawaiian word Mahalo, meaning "gratitude." "I wanted her name to be about gratitude and service," explains Chanel.

PUPPY RAISING VIA ZOOM

Despite the pandemic setbacks, it was the perfect time for Chanel to learn how to train a dog. "I had just moved to LA and wasn't working," she says. GDA | TLC provided remote training, complete with two-way learning and feedback. "They did an amazing job of preparing us with puppy kindergarten classes on Zoom," says Chanel. "I had to film myself teaching her how to sit, for example, and send it in. Then, we'd have a Zoom class reviewing the progress of each training step."

Mahalo proved to be a fast learner. "She learned her name at the end of the first week, along with how to sit and stay," says Chanel. "These dogs are incredibly smart."

Raising Mahalo wasn't without challenges. "It was a bit of a shock. I would wake her up every two hours to go to the bathroom," recounts Chanel. "Thankfully, the staff at GDA | TLC told me I didn't need to keep doing that!" Chanel's fiancé Dan was a huge help, embracing and helping train Mahalo.





AN UNEXPECTED CALL

As the 18-month training period neared its end, Chanel was emotional, knowing she would have to let Mahalo go to work as a service dog. But then, she received an unexpected call.

"They told me they wanted Mahalo to be a breeder," says Chanel. "And asked if I would consider being a breeder host." Of course, the answer was yes. Chanel was thrilled she could keep Mahalo and contribute to the service dog community by caring for a breeder. Mahalo would go through one or two heat cycles, be matched with a stud, give birth, and potentially repeat the cycle for two or three litters of puppies.

After Mahalo's breeding, she returned home. Two weeks later, an ultrasound revealed that Mahalo was pregnant — with 11 puppies. "I thought, 'Oh my God, she's pregnant — and there are a lot of sacs!'" says Chanel.

Mahalo was about to become a mama to 11 babies.

PREGNANCY, BIRTH, & COMING HOME

Unlike human gestation, it would only be a couple of months before Mahalo gave birth. Meanwhile, she ate a lot and slept a lot. "Three weeks before giving birth, she really began to show the effects of pregnancy," says Chanel. "She had a swollen belly, she was hungry, and she didn't really want to walk."

One week before her due date, Mahalo went to the GDA | TLC campus to stay until she gave birth. On April 11, 2024, Mahalo gave birth to 11 beautiful and

healthy puppies — a mix of black, white, and golden labs. Two days later, Chanel was able to visit the litter in person. Mahalo seemed happy to see Chanel, but was in "protective mama mode" with her newborns. "When I would pick one up, she would look at me like, 'That's mine,'" says Chanel. "So she was very maternal from the jump!"

For Mahalo, the first few weeks were all about feeding her new pups. Eating a whopping nine cups of food a day, it was a challenge to keep up with the nutrients needed to feed 11 puppies. "The puppies would have to take turns to feed because there were so many of them," says Chanel. "She got really skinny."

By week six, the puppies were weaned, and Mahalo was ready to go home. "By then, she couldn't get away from them faster," laughs Chanel.

"It's changed my life," says Chanel. "I've moved to this new country, and GDA | TLC offers a sense of community, and they're doing amazing work. Spending time with these dogs is so beautiful and so healing."

Gratitude and service, indeed. 🐾



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To purchase, go to "Shop GDA" on guidedogsofamerica.org or call (818) 833-6429.

2024 HOLIDAY CARD

This year's holiday card is a 5x7 fold over card, with the message inside "Sending warm wishes for happy holidays and goodness in the New Year!" These come 10 per pack along with white envelopes.

PRICE: \$15.00

Tax, shipping, and handling not included. If mailing a check, please call (818) 362-5834 to determine additional tax and shipping charges required for payment.



EVENTS CALENDAR 2024:

Aug 24	Graduation
Oct 26	Graduation
Nov 14-16	Las Vegas Weekend
Dec 3	Giving Tuesday



2024 QUILT RAFFLE

This year's beautiful and detailed quilt, **"Piece of our Heart Dogs,"** was crafted by the Quilt Squad! A friendship group comprised of members from the Orange County Quilters Guild. One lucky person will have the chance to take it home after the drawing on **Friday, December 13, 2024.** All mail must be postmarked by December 9, 2024, to qualify for a ticket. The cost is \$2 per ticket or \$10 for six tickets. Tickets can be purchased by mail, over the phone at (818) 833-6429, or in person at the school! If purchasing by mail, please include your address and phone number. (Quilt measures 58 in x 57in)



GRADUATES

(PUPPY RAISERS IN PARENTHESES)

GUIDE DOG CLASS #427

TOP ROW (FROM LEFT): Sara & Bindi (Chris Ha and Emi Uchiki), Polly & Lainy (Carly Nelson), Meredith & Wisdom (Anna Conway), William & Gizmo (Valorie Su), Josh & Kona (Sylvia Michalski), and Troy & Latte (Lorena Aceves).

BOTTOM ROW (FROM LEFT): Chris & Aiko (Jennifer Fetterman), Michael & Lassen (James Klipfel), Dr. Bill & Ford (Donna Carroll-Rich), Chelsea & Rango (Samantha Istvanyi), and David & Jade (Bob & Kathie Stegemann)

INSTRUCTORS (FROM LEFT): Sean Deeb(seated), Hanna Belyea, Jessica Simpson, Jasmine Versales, Nicole Maples, and Sean Chiles



GRADUATES

(PUPPY RAISERS IN PARENTHESES)

SERVICE DOG CLASS #428

TOP ROW (FROM LEFT): Seagar (Christne, Will, and Russell Brown), Santiago & Gromit (The Siler Family), Josh & Shane (Pamela, Kimi, and Niki Mehl), Alyssa & Anna (Colby Morita), Heather & Betts (Mike & Margo Steinmetz), Ryan & Oslo (Sarah and Alysoun Higgins)

BOTTOM ROW (FROM LEFT): Daniel & River (The Bangar Family), Janelle & Izzy (Edward Yonek & Michael Eschenbrenner), Lindsay & Riddley (Natalie Hooper), Rachel & Kynsi (Joyce Finan), Natasha & Elon (Claire Hendry)

INSTRUCTORS (FROM LEFT): Sean Deeb(seated), Nicole Maples, Jessica Simpson, & Sonia Parisi



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TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS WITH SERVICE DOGS.**

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