



MARCH 2021

# THE GUARDIAN

- Official Newsletter of MSU Tower Guard -

## This Month in MSU History

3/11/2020 - Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, MSU halts face-to-face lectures and moves coursework to virtual instruction.

3/15/1861 - Name changes to State Agricultural College.

3/18/2016 - MSU bans Hoverboards.

3/26/1979 - Led by Earvin "Magic" Johnson, MSU wins their first NCAA national basketball championship against Indiana State.

3/29/1986 - Spartans win NCAA ice hockey championship.

## Birthdays

3/14 - Grace Bonnema

3/21 - Hannah Rick

3/28 - Erin McGraw

## Life with my Service Dog, Leo

ALEXANDRA ALLERS, CSD LIAISON

I have been legally blind since birth due to a rare eye condition called Leber Congenital Amaurosis that affects the retinas and causes severe vision loss. When I was about three years old, I began navigating the world with a white cane, utilizing tactile feedback, sound cues, and orientation skills to travel. However, growing up in Michigan, my family and I were familiar with Leader Dogs for the Blind, an organization located in Rochester Hills that provides guide dog and orientation and mobility training to visually impaired clients. As a dog person, the first time I heard about guide dogs when I was very young, there was no doubt in my mind that someday I would receive one.

Leader Dog offers guide dog training to individuals who are legally blind, at least sixteen years of age, efficient with orientation and mobility skills, and able to care for a dog. I decided that the best time to get a guide dog for me would be the summer following my first year of college. It is important for guide dog handlers to have strong independent travel skills, so I wanted to ensure that I was familiar with MSU's campus before receiving a dog. After one year of using my white cane to navigate and acclimate myself to campus, I applied for guide dog training at Leader Dog in February 2020.

Last July, I was a part of the first class of Leader Dog clients since the COVID-19 closure. Leader Dog offers a variety of training options, but I participated in the on-campus training. Prior to training, clients are matched to dogs that best fit their lifestyle, travel pace, size, and stamina, based on their applications. I was matched with Leader Dog Leo, a yellow Labrador Retriever. (Continued on page 2)

For three weeks, I stayed on Leader Dog's campus in Rochester Hills, and myself and five other clients worked with guide dog mobility instructors to learn how to travel with our guide dogs in a variety of environments, as well as how to care for and bond with our dogs.

Leo and I have been working together for about seven months now, and he has changed my life for the better. Growing up, my parents taught me that I can do anything I set my mind to do despite my disability, and I have never let my visual impairment prevent me from doing the things I love or achieving success. Now, with Leo by my side, this is especially true. He has given me so much more confidence, self-assurance, and independence, all of which I have been dreaming about for years.

As a guide dog, Leo spent the first year of his life learning basic obedience and proper behavior in different settings with a puppy raiser before returning to Leader Dog to complete four months of formal harness training with a guide dog mobility instructor. Now, his main job is to help me navigate from place to place safely and efficiently. He does this by recognizing and taking me around obstacles, locating certain objects, such as empty chairs or doors, stopping at intersections, and paying attention to traffic. To ensure our safety, he has been taught intelligent disobedience, meaning that if I give him a command that he perceives would put us in danger based on the situation, he will not comply. While Leo is responsible for helping me travel safely, he does not know the routes I use to get from place to place. As his handler, I am responsible for orienting myself to the environment we are in and telling him where to guide me by using several verbal commands and hand signals. Although he has been trained to stop at intersections, he does not know when it is time to cross the street, and it is up to me to make that decision.

Although Leo and I have not yet been able to work together on campus due to the pandemic, we are looking forward to the day when we can return to MSU. Like Leo and I, there are currently many guide dog teams. Below are some things to keep in mind when you encounter a guide dog team:

- Do not call, talk to, pet, or make eye contact with a working guide dog. These things are all forms of attention that could distract the dog from performing its work safely and effectively, putting the handler in danger. It is best to act as if the dog is not there. (Continued on page 3)

"Teammates who work together are the tangible difference between good teams and great teams."

TOM IZZO  
MSU HEAD BASKETBALL COACH



Alexandra Allers and Leo at the Beaumont Tower



- A guide dog is on duty any time it is in harness, even when sitting or lying down. Always ask the handler for permission to interact with their dog.
- Never allow your pet dog near a guide dog, even when on leash. Letting your dog visit for even a second can cause the guide dog to lose focus on its work and put the team at risk. If you encounter a working guide dog team when with your pet dog, it can be helpful to notify the handler that you are nearby and have a dog with you.
- Do not take hold of the dog or harness without permission. Also, do not grab the handler's arm or interrupt a working team. If it looks like the guide dog handler may need assistance, ask the handler before taking any action yourself. They will let you know how you can best help them or whether they need assistance at all.
- When providing directions to a handler, speak directly to the person, not the dog. Be sure to use specific, easy to follow instructions.
- Please do not feed a guide dog, on or off duty. Guide dogs follow a specific, veterinarian-prescribed diet to maximize their working life.
- Remember that a guide dog team has the right of way and access everywhere the public is allowed under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Guide dogs do not understand social distancing. Please keep a safe distance by staying six feet away. It helps to verbally announce your presence.

Sources:

"The Seeing Eye - 2020 Pledge." The Seeing Eye, [www.seeingeye.org/pledge2020.html](http://www.seeingeye.org/pledge2020.html). Accessed 20 Feb. 2021.

"When You Meet a Leader Dog." Leader Dogs for the Blind, 28 Mar. 2018, [www.leaderdog.org/blog/when-you-meet-a-leader-dog/](http://www.leaderdog.org/blog/when-you-meet-a-leader-dog/). Accessed 20 Feb. 2021.

## Reminders!

- Our 21st annual Shamrock 5k is on March 14 at 2 p.m. Eastern and will be virtual. Register at <https://www.msutowerguard.org/events>
- Have 40 hours by the end of March
- 2021-22 recruitment is postponed
- Remember to take pictures of anything Tower Guard and share them with Laya, our TG Historian!
- Attend Spartan Ties and/or Spartan Study to earn live hours!