

IGDD Story: Amanda Heal

Location: Canberra

A life of purpose with Guide Dog Sadie by her side.

Amanda, an accomplished professional in her fifties, has never let being totally blind since birth hold her back. Based in Canberra, she worked as a government lawyer for 17 years before retraining as a coach and speaker. Amanda also runs a successful coaching business for women, hosts a podcast, is the author of two books, is a regular speaker at events and trains others on improving accessibility for people with low vision or blindness. But she hasn't done it alone! Every step of the way, she's had a loyal Guide Dog by her side.

Amanda will never forget the first time she experienced walking with a Guide Dog. A cane user since the age of eight, she recalls, "Using a cane felt very mechanical." It was a way of getting around that never quite felt right for her. Years ago, while doing cane training, Amanda had the opportunity to sit in on some of the Guide Dog classes run by instructors. She ended up attending about half of them and remembers thinking, "Wow, this would be so good!"

When she took a test walk with a Guide Dog, Amanda was surprised by how natural and fluid it felt. It gave her a real sense of what it might be like for a sighted person to walk down the street. Getting her first Guide Dog wasn't just a game changer—it was life-changing.

Amanda and Sadie's unbreakable bond.

Now partnered with her fourth Guide Dog, Sadie, Amanda takes getting around in her stride. With Sadie by her side, she says, "Travel is so pleasant and easy. And you know you're not going to fall because Sadie's going to stop at the steps, and she's going to cross straight across the road."

At 11 years old, Sadie might be on the older side for a Guide Dog, but she's healthy and still eager to work. Whether she's lying in the sun next to Amanda's desk while she works, walking with her to the shops or the hairdresser, or heading to the local club for lunch with friends, Sadie's always by Amanda's side.

Amanda says of her constant companion, "She's very reliable, very steady, and she's always there. She's a rock-solid best friend. I live on my own, so she is company for me."

Confidence on four paws.

But even with Sadie's support and after all the incredible things Amanda has achieved in her life—including climbing to an altitude of over 10,000 feet in Nepal—there was one area of daily life where she really struggled...

"I didn't catch a bus for almost 20 years, and I became so afraid of catching buses and getting lost that I was basically housebound. I would only walk to the shops or catch a taxi," says Amanda.

However, when Amanda had the opportunity to become a Lived Experience Presenter for Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, she was challenged to catch the bus to as many engagements as possible.

“I was so anxious, I almost threw up,” Amanda recalls.

But she wanted the job—so with Guide Dogs’ support and intensive bus route training, Amanda and Sadie now catch buses across Canberra to their various speaking engagements. Every two weeks, they even deliver a 90-minute training session to Canberra bus drivers on how to make bus travel more accessible for people with low vision or blindness.

“I’m still an anxious traveller, but I know that I can just reach down and pat Sadie. If I do get lost, I can hug her, have a bit of a cry, then get up, and off I go again. I’m not doing this alone; I’m doing it with Sadie.”

Amanda also knows that she has the support of Guide Dogs NSW/ACT whenever she needs it and has been a Guide Dogs Client for 47 years. “It’s so nice to know that if there is any problem with Sadie, I can just call Guide Dogs, and someone will come and help or give advice over the phone. Their services are amazing!”

More than a Guide Dog, Sadie is a socialite and secret keeper.

But it’s not all work and no play for Amanda and Sadie. When Sadie is out of her harness and off-duty, she enjoys belly rubs and chasing Amanda’s 92-year-old mum’s tiny poodle around the yard.

Amanda says, “When she’s in harness, she’s absolutely on the job. But when she’s out of harness, she’s a bit of a socialite. She loves people...”

Every week, Amanda goes out with friends to her local club, where the staff know her and Sadie well. Amanda takes off Sadie’s harness, and Sadie wanders up and down under the table, receiving pats and enjoying her night out.

Of their special bond, Amanda says, “She gives me confidence, she gives me company, and she gives me emotional support. Dogs are the best keepers of secrets—you can tell them anything!”