



## Waunakee Rotary Club

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For a blind person, a guide dog is like a car, offering transportation options and mobility.

Nicole Meadowcroft, president of OccuPaws, shared how her guide dog changed her life at the March 25 Waunakee Rotary Club meeting.

Nicole was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa when she was a teenager. She was in denial that she would go blind, she said, and hid her loss of vision from her friends and family until it became obvious. She lacked confidence and often did not venture from her home.

In 2004, Nicole became pregnant with her first daughter.

"The reality hit me that I had to do something about my future mobility," she said.

Nicole had always trained dogs and began to consider a guide dog. The closest guide dog training campus was in Michigan with others in California and New York, she learned. Nicole said she was reluctant to travel that far. Also, she thought the dog would have to be retrained once it came home and encountered a new environment.

That prompted Nicole to do her own work with her dog at home. She had a 3-year-old German Shepherd and decided to train it and put a harness on it.

Then a man contacted her wanting to join her dog training group. It turned out he, too, was blind. They trained Nicole's first bona fide guide dog, Dale, and that dog has changed Nicole's life.

"My self confidence has gone through the roof," Nicole said, adding that she is much more independent. With Dale, Nicole goes shopping at the mall, which is a huge achievement, she said.

From then, in December 2006, the OccuPaws Guide Dog Association was formed.

OccuPaws has since implemented the only program of its kind for blind youths and their families. The teams for training those dogs include the parents, the trainer, the dog and any teachers. Children also are trained to use the dogs and a cane at the same time.

The dogs increase the children's self esteem and their interaction with classmates.

"You're not the blind girl with the cane. You're the blind girl with the cool dog," Nicole said.

She added that during her outings with Dale at the mall, people tend to focus their attention on the dog rather than her.

OccuPaws is a completely volunteer organization. Each dog, valued at \$25,000, is provided free to families.

The association does have several needs such as a vehicle and an indoor training facility to work with dogs.

Dogs with certain blood lines are ready for training at about 18 months of age. Currently, OccuPaws has trained Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, German Shepherds and Standard Poodles. Until the time of training, the dogs live with families who socialize them.

OccuPaws has two fund-raising events coming up. On April 10, there will be a poker tournament at Scatz Sports Bar and Night Club in Middleton, and on May 22, a Jog/Walk for Dogs is planned. For information, see the Web site, [www.occupaws.org](http://www.occupaws.org).

#### In other news:

•The club's exchange student, Bird, is currently playing lacrosse and practicing at Prairie Elementary. He could sometimes use a ride home from there. If anyone is available, let Harriet Statz know. Also, next year's exchange student is coming from Belgium, although her family is

### OFFICERS

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### Calendar of Events:

- May 17, Jachin Jordan Golf Outing at Bishop's Bay
- March 27, Easter Egg Hunt, 10 a.m
- April 24, District Assembly in Wisconsin Dells.
- May 1, Rotary Work Day

Lebanese, Harriet said.

•The club formally inducted Kim Kalepp. Kim said he spent 25 years in the Kiwanis Club in Baraboo and is looking forward to being a part of Rotary.

•Leonard Allen reminded the club that garage sale time is around the corner, and business owners may want to think about advertising in the village-wide garage sale day maps.

Guests: Leslie Guigerz, guest of Linda Olson; Nicole Jahnke, guest of Harriet Statz.

Visiting Rotarians: Shawn Fisher, Madison South.

Birthdays: April 1, Ken Pesik; April 4, Ray Statz; April 7, Connie Blau

Anniversaries: None.

Prayers: April 1, Leonard Allen; April 8, Pat Durden; April 15, Susan Vergeront.

Programs: April 1, Club Assembly and Todd Scheffler, Waunakee-DeForest Ice Rink update.

Greeters: April 1, Ken Pesik and Bob Pulvermacher; April 8, Tom Reis and Ellen Schaaf; April 15, Jim Schmitz and Steve Schlaver.