**Comet’s Landing**

At the young age of 13 in the summer of 1981, I was sitting on the back end of my dad’s white pickup truck with our family dog, Brandy. We were taking a break from the activities, and my mom caught that Kodak moment on camera. Just 6 years prior to the flash of that camera, I was diagnosed with Usher Syndrome. Growing up in the small town of Lindstrom, Minnesota, life was active on top of that hill across the road from the lake where we lived. I rode my Schwinn bike as a newspaper carrier, a John Deere rider lawn mower cutting long grass for my local customers, and I even drove our snowmobile across the frozen lakes for winter fun. I was also on the baseball team as well as the Saturday morning bowling league. Getting around was easy and convenient for me in those days, even with poor vision. As I sat there with Brandy, it never dawned on me that 40 years later a (guide) dog would be my new “convenient” of getting around.

Fast forward to the Spring of 2021. At the young (not a typo) age of 53, I was sitting on the park bench with my guide dog taking a break from our neighborhood training route. As the cool air swirled around us, it was another Kodak moment taken by my guide dog instructors, Sarah, and Emily. Just 10 months prior to the flash of that camera, I had submitted my application for a guide dog to the Leader Dogs for the Blind (LDB) school in Rochester Hills, Michigan. It was a decision that took years in the making. My red and white cane, of which I’ve employed since 2002, began to fall short of my independence getting around. Ironically, I was experiencing an uptick in numerous unexpected encounters of others with guide dogs as well as guide dog information booths. All of which led to conversations that kept me pursuing for the right answer to my future mobility and quality of life. As my two young daughters, Sadie, and Siena, grew more independent, they frequented their desire to have a family dog. My response would always be, “Okay, but you need to wait for daddy’s guide dog”. Those requests were really the ultimate nudging I needed in my decision to finally take this step. I really wanted my daughters to experience a family dog like I did when growing up, as well as witness how a guide dog can help someone with visual impairment daily. It is a piece of my motivation to show my daughters what perseverance can look like.

All the stars were lining up as an indication that this was all meant to be, and at just the right time. My application for a guide dog was approved by late summer 2020 with the plan for enrollment in their Spring class. But as the pandemic raged over the long winter months, LDB was unable to offer in-person training on their campus. The in-person training would have required a 3-week stay at their school which would have been hard on my family having me away for that long. One day in late winter, I received a call from LDB that they were offering Home Delivery of my new guide dog. I was ecstatic with the news because that was exactly what I had preferred all along! That means the instructors would drive to Minnesota with my new guide dog and we would train right here in my own stomping grounds in just half the time. That took away my anxiety of traveling to Michigan during the pandemic, especially the return trip with a new dog on a plane. And as a bonus, my family could have some involvement during training. To exemplify just how small of a world it can be, I learned that another individual in the Twin Cities had also applied for a guide dog at the same school. Her name is Maya, and her guide dog (Paul) was to be home delivered on the same trip. Maya also has Usher Syndrome of whom I’ve never met before even though she is only about 30-some miles from me. On top of that, I already knew her dad through the Twin Cities Chapter for the Blind as well as the Twin Cities VisionWalk. So, the date was set for mid-April and we would get a chance to meet during training.

Leading up to the big arrival, I had put in a lot of time and effort to be well-prepared as I am the planning type. I read all the lesson plans provided by LDB. I bought a dog crate, pillows, bowls, and toys. LDB would provide the rest of the needed items upon arrival, including recommended choice food and treats. One important requirement was that we needed a fenced-in yard, which to me is much more functional than using a long tie-down. Right after my application for the guide dog was approved, I started the process of hiring a fence company with the goal of completed installation before the snowflakes fall in December. However, the pandemic hit the smaller fence companies hard as supplies were difficult to obtain for their jobs. Due to that reason, the fence installation would need to wait until Spring. As Spring came upon us, fencing supplies were still scarce, and even more expensive. As the anxiety seeped in, we finally had an installation date scheduled for early April. In the meantime, I remodeled my home office to be a more functional agile setting, pun intended, with my new guide dog because I work from home almost 100% of the time as a Software Engineer these days. Now what else was I missing? Oh yeah, the designated location of the outdoor bathroom area for the guide dog. They are trained to go to the bathroom on the “park” command which is incredible if you really think about it. I often joked with my family that we’d have accidents in the house if any of us blurted out “Hey, who wants to go to the park?.......wait, NO!”. I must admit though, I did go overboard with the whole bathroom thing. First, I spent way too much time researching in-ground pet waste digesters until my wife, Sharon, talked me out of it. So, I then independently proceeded to the next greatest invention by purchasing a Pooper Scooper. I’ve never heard of these things before because when I was growing up, I would just use a shovel and disposing was much more convenient. As the Pooper Scooper arrived on my doorsteps in just 2 days as if it was some kind of emergency, a bewildered Sharon once again extinguished the flames of my brilliance and said, “Just use plastic bags to pick it up, dispose in the trash, and you won’t need to wash off the scooper several times a day”. Well of course, I knew that! Wait, I got another idea. How about I use it in the wintertime for stool pickup in the snow?

The big weekend finally arrived. With the fence installation completed on that Friday, I could breathe a huge sigh of relief. Those guys worked hard to deliver their promise on time for this very special occasion, and I forever grateful for them. Saturday morning, Emily and Sarah were enroute from Michigan with both guide dogs. Upon arrival on Sunday, the plan was to drop off Maya’s guide dog first and get her situated. Then drive to my house to drop off my guide dog and get me situated. The training would then start first thing Monday morning. Just when I thought everything was picture perfect, one of my daughters fell ill Saturday afternoon. Because of that, we needed to have a negative COVID test before training could begin, or even meet the instructors and the guide dog. I felt myself transition into panic mode as I informed Emily via text, who was already halfway on the trip. It was a long tense two days waiting for the test results. Emily and Sarah would just keep my guide dog at their Airbnb in St. Paul while we wait. Finally, late Monday afternoon we received great news that the test results were negative. I could breathe again.

The doorbell rang at 6:00pm sharp that same evening. Emily was standing there holding a box of items and goodies for the guide dog. The plan was to go over some things first, and then have a grand entrance for my guide dog to meet us. We finally learned the name of my guide dog……Comet! No, not one of Santa’s reindeers, but certainly will guide my sleigh any day. Even though the name didn’t start with the letter ‘S’ like the rest of our names in our entire household, we absolutely loved it. Comet is a yellow Labrador, 22 months old at the time, and a boy of which evened out the gender count under our roof. During the entire process, it was mutually agreed to keep those details a secret to create fun anticipation. But of course, that was difficult to do. However, the Friday before, Emily asked if I wanted to know one detail to begin the weekend of this big occasion. Do I want to know the color, breed, or gender? The name was not an option. After consulting with my family, I gave in and chose the breed. It turned out to be exactly what I was hoping for of which was stated as my preference in my application. I got a 2-for-1 deal by accident because Emily said, “Yellow Lab”.

Now it was time for Comet to come in and meet our family. Emily went back out to the well-advertised van to retrieve him as we anxiously waited in our living room prepared with video to capture the big moment. I sat in the recliner around the corner holding some Charlie Bear treats having been instructed to call his name once they entered the door. This was different from going to a pet store or someone’s home to have your pick of the litter. This was like waiting to see your newborn for the very first time, wondering what he or she will look like. As the front door opened, we could hear Emily talking to Comet as his tail banged around with excitement. I called his name, and Comet made his way to the living room with an incredible burst of energy as he said hello with a big smile on his face. He saw the treats as I held out my hand and immediately accepted the offer with such craze. Simba, our 22-month-old cat, wanted no part of this and ran upstairs to hide for 2 weeks. Bouncing all over the place with joy, Comet was ready to move right in. Comet had finally landed home from his long journey training in various places as well as the road trip. As the party wore on for a couple more hours to start this new chapter, it was time for Emily to retire for the night back in Saint Paul. Training would begin at 8:30am for the morning session, followed by a break for lunch and then an afternoon session. I had taken time off from work to maintain my focus solely on the training. After some additional visiting with Comet and processing all the new information, we were exhausted. We decided to have Comet sleep in the large wire crate in our bedroom at least for the initial time being. There was a plastic pan that goes on the bottom of the crate that he slept on just for the first few nights as recommended to ensure there would be no pillow chewing from being in a new setting. The chain and ID tags on Comet’s collar rattled on the plastic pan as he moved around while he was sleeping. Of course, I didn’t hear any of that with my hearing aid and cochlear implant tucked away neatly in my nightstand drawer. But I was still awake chewing my own pillow as many things rushed through my mind on what this new commitment entails. Is he always this excited? Will he always follow me around the house? Does he always have to be on a tie-down? What parts of the house should I allow him to be in? Will he be getting into things? How often do I need to park him? How often do I have to walk him? Does he go everywhere with me? After all, my goal was to make my life easier. There was an overwhelming amount of information to process when this whole thing became a reality just hours earlier. I’ve had dogs growing up, but there’s a big difference between having a working dog versus a family dog. It suddenly felt like a heavy burden put on my shoulders that I never anticipated. What have I gotten myself into?

The next morning, I got up earlier than normal as I needed to park Comet and then feed him breakfast before training. “Ok Comet, park”. It is not easy to spot the stool on the ground for someone with low vision because it blends in with the grass. Armed with a plastic bag, I figure out a way to identify the exact spot by putting my foot nearby without having to watch the entire show. When Emily arrived, we reviewed Comet’s first night as well as the game plan for the day. The itinerary called for a consistent route each day along with other types of training. And of course, Mother Nature decided to throw us some cold and sometimes drizzly weather, so we needed to bundle up. By this time in the process, guide dogs already possess the skillset to safely lead you. So now, I needed to learn how to use Comet as well as train him new routes and what to find. Comet is also trying to figure me out with my walk pace and my lifestyle. Guide dogs really appreciate consistent routes whenever possible because after all, they cannot read your mind where you want to go. Our training route was a rectangle shape in our neighborhood which featured a stop at the neighborhood park mid-route. Before training with Comet, I would train with Emily in a technique called Juno. Emily would hold on to the head of the harness as if she was the guide dog. I would hold on to the harness handle and leash to be led. It felt kind of silly at first as we walked around the neighborhood as I was to give her commands. Turns out, I mastered Juno.

“Ok Comet, heel”. Comet would immediately position himself on my left side. As I proceeded to put the harness on Comet, he was so studiously willing to stand still while he gets his cool equipment strapped on. There is also the leash that connects to the O-ring of the chain part of his Martingale collar which is used for handling with any distractions. For the initial training with Comet, Emily would have her own leash to clip on while walking on Comet’s left side. I will always be on Comet’s right side. It was like Drivers Education class where the instructor rode in the passenger seat with their own set of brakes. Comet knows voice commands and hand gestures which are used together at the same time. “Ok Comet, forward” (back of hand facing forward, low in front and slightly move hand upright). Dogs typically have very good hearing, so you don’t need shout the commands so everyone can hear. They also have excellent vision, so you don’t need to make exaggerated hand signals. By the way, there’s no hand signal for “Park” in case you are wondering. Comet started down our driveway. “Comet, right” (back of hand facing forward, low in front and slightly move hand to the right). He turned right and onto the sidewalk. At this point, he’s following the shoreline of where the sidewalk meets the grass on the left side since he is always on my left. I’m right-handed and I always use my cane with my right hand, so this took some getting used to. It does go against sidewalk etiquette where you always stay to your right. Guide dogs will follow the shoreline until there’s an obstacle, a crossing/curb, or a new command given. Comet led me all the way to the end of our block and stopped at the crossing which is near our neighborhood entrance. He looked up at me awaiting the next command, but surely more so for the treat. After feeling the ground with my left foot to ensure I am at the curb, I praised him and gave him a training treat of which he gobbled out of my hand. After admiring the saliva on my hand, I looked both ways and listened for traffic. All clear! “Ok Comet, forward” (hand gesture). He leads me across and stops at the curb on the other side. “Good boy! Forward Left” (back of hand facing forward, low in front and slightly move hand left). He starts forward a couple steps, then left, and stops at that curb. Again, as he looks up at me, I pour out the praise along with a training treat(s). “Shhhhhh! Don’t tell Emily how many treats you got on that one, buddy”. The purpose of the praising and training treats is letting Comet know he is performing as expected and in turn, motivates him to keep performing well. He learns the route, and each time it’s more fluent because it’s consistent. As we arrived at the park, the goal was to have Comet lead me to the picnic table under the gazebo. As we arrive at the table based on my commands getting to that point (forward, right, left), I would then say “Comet, find the table” while holding my hand out with a treat right at the seat of the table. This is called Targeting. We practice targeting by taking a few steps back, say “Find the table”. He leads me to the table, and upon success, he gets praise and a treat. This is repeated several times with each time being further back. It is truly remarkable how fast Comet learns and remembers.

We completed the rectangle route 2 times that morning. It went well, and it felt very natural to me. However, at the same time I was still very overwhelmed processing all of this. I can’t imagine how Comet must feel trying o learn new routes and bond with a new person. We then took a long break for lunch separately to relax and rest up for the afternoon session. It was nice to get back inside to warm up. During my lunch break, I began having an anxiety attack about this new level of commitment. REALLY bad. For two long hours. When Emily returned after lunch, Sarah was with her to join us for the afternoon session. But instead of practicing the route, I requested that we all sit down and have a conversation about this, including Sharon. For the next 2 hours, I poured myself out leaving nothing behind. I was comforted to how everyone was so compassionate and empathetic to my concerns. I even cried during the ordeal. There was absolutely nothing wrong with Comet as he is such a beautiful dog, well-trained, and well-behaved. It was just this new kind of commitment that was eating me up. I learned that these kinds of feelings are normal for new guide dog handlers, and that guide dog instructors are trained to deal with these kinds of emotions. After my dramatic performance ended, we agreed that Emily and Sarah would take Comet for the rest of the day and overnight to give me some space to clear my head, and literally, to breathe. Then we can decide the next step the next morning. There was absolutely no pressure put on me to keep going with the program, but it wasn’t that simple in my mind. For the rest of that day and throughout the night, I wrestled through a myriad of emotions in failing to shake off the anxiety. The pressure was mounting, and I just wanted to quit and go back to my comfort zone. I was more worried about disappointing everyone after all my sales talk and promises for so long. I was even worried our cat, Simba, wreaking havoc on our new home with his own possible disappointment of another animal in his territory. The fence had cost a lot of money and effort in only being installed because of the anticipated guide dog. I had put in a lot of effort in the past year to get to this point in completing all the requirements for application approved. I was second guessing myself about the cane not being good enough anymore. All the pieces were perfectly put in place along with great people, and I’m now having a breakdown?

The next morning, I was trying to buy more time as I was still on the fence about continuing. But I was more on the verge of quitting due to the pressure from my own doing until I had a conversation with Sharon in the kitchen. As I was trying to talk myself out of this, Sharon said something to me in a way that hit me like a ton of bricks. She told me that she felt I would really regret it if I chose to quit right now. Hearing that from Sharon was exactly what I needed because that told me in a powerful way, she’s got my back. Suddenly, the black clouds drifted away from my mind. I honestly had prayed to God the night before seeking direction and help to overcome my emotions. When Emily and Sarah arrived shortly thereafter, I invited them into our living room for another heartfelt conversation minus all the drama. After attempting to redeem myself for half an hour, I finally arrived at my decision and told them I was ready to continue and get right back to work. Everyone was very supportive, either way. The morning walk went very well just like the previous day, and I felt upbeat. Sarah needed to leave to go work with Maya and Paul, so we invited Emily to stay for a Subway lunch. We chatted like old friends as we all got to know each other and relax a bit. After we completed the afternoon session, Emily asked if I was ready to play with Comet in the back yard. Now besides being a working dog, Comet is certainly a family dog and can play with any of us. But it is important to have some guidelines so that Comet is still following commands and good manners. “Comet, sit” (palm of hand facing forward, low in front and slightly move hand upright). I lofted the Kong high and far as Comet then took off in turbo mode. He brought the Kong back to me with pure excitement as his tail wagged back and forth in a frenzy. “Good boy! Comet, give”. He dropped the Kong. “Good boy! (insert treat here). My first play date with Comet was epic. The sun was finally shining that day as we bonded in the cold air, capped with a perfect photo that says it all. We then headed to Petco to get more food for Comet and Emily showed me around the store as I marveled at all the choices to choose from for everything. I wonder what they charged for digesters and scoopers here? It was such a great day, and Comet moved back in. This time, we took Comet’s collar off at night and Sharon got a good night’s sleep. What a difference from just 24 hours ago. Slowly, but surely.

Comet is trained to stop at curbs, crossings, full obstacles, and traffic. He will guide me around partial obstacles. One day, we did a session that sounds scary which is called Traffic Stopping. Sarah would be waiting in a car on the opposite side of the road. Emily would walk on Comet’s left side with a leash connected, and I would walk on his right side with leash & harness. As we walked down the sidewalk with Comet guiding me, Sarah would intentionally pull into the driveway in front of us. Even though I knew what the game plan was, I did not see where Sarah was parked or when she suddenly pulled into the driveway in front of us. Behold, the Great Comet stopped! I was so impressed despite growing a few white hairs. “Good boy, Comet!” He proudly gulped down his treat. We did this a few more times, and each time Comet passed with flying colors. Glad to have survived that.

Target training is something Comet learns on the fly. I already mentioned about finding the table in the park. One day we headed to the strip mall just up the road from my home within walking distance, albeit a longer walk. This strip mall has several places that I use – Subway, Century Salon, and Carbonies Pizza. There is even a pet grooming place there waiting to meet us someday. We designed this session to cover all aspects of Comet’s skillset. The first part was crossing the busy road right at the outskirts of the roundabout using the crosswalk. Now if you are familiar with roundabouts, it’s similar to the Tilt O’ Whirl at the carnival along with a lot more noise when standing near one. As I scanned the area from the curb, a couple of cars stopped for us as they probably saw the harness. “Ok Comet, forward” (hand gesture). We safely crossed and he stopped at the curb on the other side of the crosswalk. “Good boy! Comet, right, forward”. We proceeded down the tar walking/biking path to the next intersection. “Comet, left, forward”. We then proceeded up the sidewalk to the next intersection. “Good boy! (insert treat here) Comet, left, left, left”. The reason for that is there’s no sidewalk for this stretch. We proceeded up the side of the strip mall entrance to the end where the sidewalk meets the corner. This is called the countryline method (as opposed to the shoreline method) following the curb while on the side of the road. In this case, the guide dog should always be on the curb side and you on the outside. At the end of the stretch, we stop, and I scan for traffic while re-positioning onto the sidewalk and facing right. “Comet, forward” (hand gesture). We safely cross and now this part of the sidewalk is where the stores are lined up. As we walk down the sidewalk, it is my job to look up and find the store name i need to go to. All the doors look alike. While I’m doing this, I trust that Comet is guiding me in a straight line and on the lookout for any obstacles. With the cane, I spend more time looking down watching where I’m going. This time with a guide dog, I will make sure I enter the right store. Did I tell you about the time I entered and sat down in the Nails Salon for 5 minutes waiting for my haircut appointment before finally realizing I was in the wrong store which was right next door to Century (hair) Salon? I spotted the Subway sign, and I immediately said, “Comet, right, find the door” (hand gesture). As we arrived at the door, I put my hand by the door handle with a treat, “Good boy, Comet!”. Just like at the park, you repeat several times until he learns and remembers. I now feel very confident I won’t end up in the Nail Salon when I’m hungry for a sandwich.

On another day, it was raining and so I suggested we go to my church since it wouldn’t be busy on a weekday. There were two things we could work on that would be helpful. The first thing I always do when arriving at church is make a beeline to the coffee center. I really enjoy having coffee while listening to the sermon because it’s from Starbucks, no offense to the sermon. As I suspected, the place was wide open on that Tuesday, and we could practice without any distractions. “Comet, find the coffee”. Again, it was the same drill as we did at the park and Subway. He mastered it in record time. Next, we practiced sitting in the worship auditorium. Due to the pandemic, the seats are socially distanced. During service, the seating area is always dimmed, and I need to keep in mind where to position Comet laying on the floor out of other’s way. I have to say that the socially distanced seating is more comfortably spacious for Comet to lay down. But I need to make sure others are not petting him because he is on the job as he is still wearing the harness, or feeding him the holy bread while service is in progress. The best part of the session was that Comet got to meet the pastor who made him feel welcome!

Comet is also trained to not be distracted by other animals or pedestrians. If he does become distracted, I am to activate the leash with my right hand and gently pull him back into focus. It was interesting when we were walking down the sidewalk in one session where distractions were unexpectedly apparent. First, one house had two barking dogs just inside their fence line. Comet paid no attention to them and kept guiding me along. Comet does not even bark for the most part which is really a pleasant temperament to have. Further up our route, a school bus was letting off some children and Comet simply guided me around them on the sidewalk without stopping (a partial obstacle). But bear in mind that guide dogs are not perfect as it does happen once in awhile where something would distract Comet, such as another cute dog coming our way on the same sidewalk, or some suspicious smell along the shoreline.

We finally had the opportunity to meet Maya and Paul for lunch in the conference room of the Airbnb Emily and Sarah were staying at. This would be good practice that mimics a restaurant setting. Now, Paul and Comet knew each other from the long drive to Minnesota from Michigan, but their friendship goes back 6 months where they trained together at the school. We had our guide dogs positioned on opposite ends of the table during our lunch. After enjoying conversation for quite a while, it was now time for Paul and Comet to play together! We moved the table and chairs back against the wall to create some play space. “Comet, sit” (Shawn hand gesture). “Paul, sit” (Maya hand gesture). We all looked at each other. Ready? Wait, what do you mean by that? What’s going to happen? The dogs were growing restless. “OK!” In a blur, Paul and Comet lunged at each other overjoyed of being reunited once again. That was quite the sight for what seemed like an eternity as I have never seen dogs play like that before.

After a few days of drama and 9 days of training, I graduated. Graduating was a mixed bag for me. Even though the training itself went extremely well and we had a lot of fun along the way, it dawned on me that I was soon to be on my own, fully in charge. I was just getting comfortable here! I really didn’t want Emily and Sarah to leave town, but it was time. It was like having our first newborn and staying at the hospital for several days where they take such good care of you. And the coffee was free and always available. Then when you bring the newborn home, you are fully in charge now. Emily reminded me that they will still always be there for me to help with questions and concerns along my journey. As I signed all the paperwork, it reminded me of 2018 when I first wrote my story for the Usher Syndrome Society signatured by my own advice at the time that I’ve been preaching ever since:

*“****If you are to persevere in your struggles and overcome obstacles, it is essential to step out of your comfort zone.  This allows you to grow in strength, confidence, and courage over time.  Be honest with who you are and what you need, because at some point in time, ‘getting by’ isn’t good enough anymore.”***

This experience with Comet is the perfect example to my own advice. Sure, I can still get by with my cane, but it really wasn’t good enough anymore. Transitioning to Comet has given me the kind of freedom that brings both laughter, joy, and empowerment. Comet has opened my failing field of vision as he is my new set of eyes to explore the world in a new way. I can now go for walks where I can focus on enjoying the view rather than fixating my eyes down on the path I’m trying to navigate. One time he led me around a front yard sprinkler system that was hitting the sidewalk area. Another time, I got a good laugh when I was cleaning up his stool and I missed a piece. Comet so diligently put his nose by the piece I missed letting me know. Playing in the yard, tagging along to the store or appointments, outdoor movies at the park, horse shows, and of course bonding in my mancave watching ESPN together have all been enjoyed in just a couple of months already. I’ve joked that Comet cares more about me than Sharon does because he follows me around and is always watching out for me. To that point, it’s interesting trying to teach Comet to “Stay”. This Fall, I will be the Walk Chair for the Twin Cities VisionWalk that is affiliated with Foundation Fighting Blindness. And for the first time in the Twin Cities VisionWalk’s 15-year history, a guide dog will be co-Chair as Comet joins me up on stage.

Being in charge of my Usher Syndrome was really the silver lining of graduating. When I was at my lowest point in the beginning of my training, I reached out to family, close friends, fellow guide dog handlers, Emily & Sarah, and God. Not one person told me to give up. Everyone told me something that reminded me why I was doing this, and I cannot thank them enough. Comet takes care of me, and I take care of him. We are a team, competing against Usher Syndrome. Companionship. An unbreakable bond. Someone told me that a year from now, I will feel that I cannot live without Comet. I already feel that way and just love having him in my life. I cannot wait to experience the many more adventures that awaits us on the horizon.