

Professor gets around with the help of a furry friend

By Peter Meier

Of the Emerald

Dr. Sidney Bernhard is blind, but the University professor of chemistry has found a new friend to help him find his way to and from his third-story Science building office.

Last month, Bernhard returned from a month-long stay at Guide Dogs for the Blind, a San Rafael, Calif., school that trains guide dogs and teaches blind people to use them. Bernhard brought a two-year-old golden retriever named Ajax back to Eugene.

Bernhard says Ajax' arrival has made his life easier. While Bernhard used to take a bus to work and find his way down sidewalks with a cane, he now walks more than a mile to work and back every day, using Ajax to guide him.

"I can move much faster now," Bernhard said. "With Ajax, I can walk faster than most people do."

Ajax tries to guide Bernhard even faster, but Bernhard does not let him increase their walking pace.

"I know Ajax could guide me safely at that pace, but I just can't move that fast," he said.

Bernhard is reluctant to explain how Ajax has changed his life because he has only had the dog for a few weeks.

Ajax helps Bernhard find his way safely on sidewalks, guiding him around pedestrians and other obstructions. The dog always stops at curbs, letting Bernhard know he has come to an intersection. Bernhard listens for traffic, and when it sounds safe, he orders Ajax to move forward. However, if a car is approaching, Ajax will stay still, keeping his master safely off the street.

Ajax also helps Bernhard find doorways and elevator entrances. Ajax also guides Bernhard in stores.

While Bernhard is very satisfied with the dog's training, Eugene's wet climate has given him a problem he would not have in California. Ajax hates to cross puddles.

"He sees puddles as obstructions because he can't see the bottom of them," Bernhard explained. "When it rains, and the puddles form, he tries to go around them, and this has caused some problems."

While Bernhard guides the dog with



Photo by Shu-Shing Chen

Now that chemistry Professor Sidney Bernhard has Ajax, a Seeing Eye dog, he walks to school rather than take the bus.

voice commands, the dog also is trained to respond to its master's movements.

The dog can sense when Bernhard wants to turn left or right. Bernhard can command the dog to find doorways and stairs, to turn left and right, and to stop or move forward. And when the dog becomes excited or distracted, Bernhard can cool him with the command "stand steady."

Ajax has had a little difficulty keeping from becoming distracted, Bernhard said, particularly when people on campus have tried to pet the dog while he is working.

"I've had some students come over and pet him and say, 'What a nice dog you have,' and I can't scream at them, but I just try to be polite and say 'Yes, but

he should not be petted while he is working.'"

Bernhard wishes people knew not to distract Ajax, he said. Guide dogs are trained not to be distracted by other animals or people while they are in their harness because when they become distracted, they can endanger their masters. However, they sometimes fail to abide by the training.

"He is never bothered when he has to pass another dog, but when a dog growls at him, he has a difficult time restraining himself," Bernhard said.

Ajax is noticeably serious when he is harnessed, not usually giving attention to anything but his master's commands, even when riding in an elevator. However, Bernhard said that when Ajax

is not in his harness, he will play and romp just like any other dog.

During his month at Guide Dogs for the Blind, Bernhard was instructed on the nature of dog behavior for four days. He then began a hectic pace of learning to walk with the dog on small and big city streets. With 15 other classmates in the program, each with their own dog, he walked around downtown San Francisco, through Chinatown, Union Square and crossed Van Ness St., which is considered the city's busiest street. He also was trained to handle many special situations with Ajax, and learned how to command him when he is out of the harness.

Upon his graduation from the program, Bernhard received a ceremonial leash to his dog.

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