



*by Jennifer
Hines*

The Groomed Guider

A story of a student and her furry friend

With a determined look on her face, Amber Bass takes a deep breath, swallows her mounting anxiety and pushes open the door to the fast food restaurant that had twice kicked her out.

Amber isn't your typical fast food consumer. Amber suffers from retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic mutation that is causing her to go blind. Retinitis pigmentosa is a rare eye disease where the retina is damaged and causes severe tunnel vision. Because of this condition, she has a four-legged set of eyes that lead her everywhere.

Amber met her guide dog, Truly, a black lab with big golden eyes, in June 2014 after going through a special program with Guide Dogs for the Blind. Amber flew out to California for two weeks to meet her new partner and ever since she came back home, the two have been inseparable.

"[Truly] is literally an extension of my left arm," Amber says. "She's my eyes."

Truly guides Amber around campus without making a noise besides the occasional yawn or sleepy grunt. Her golden eyes stay focused on their route and, almost as if she is psychically connected to Amber, knows exactly which direction to take. But, the moment Amber takes off Truly's harness, Truly begins to act just like any other dog, running in circles and barking for her toys. Most of all, Truly loves to get pets from anyone who will give them because this is only allowed when her harness is off.

Amber was paired with Truly the summer before she came to college at East Carolina University. Truly helped Amber navigate through orientation and has since learned every shortcut on ECU's campus. Together, they now reside in Cotten Residence Hall.

The familiar jingle of a lead smacking against a harness tells the residents of Cotten's first floor girl's hall that Amber and Truly are passing through on their way to class. On a good day, the people on her hall tell her "hello" and go on about their business. Other days, they talk to Truly and try to pet her. Amber finds this a bigger nuisance than people realize.

Even Amber's mother, Cyndi Crandall, notices that the number of people stopping Amber to talk to Truly, even with a giant "Ignore me, I'm working" sign on Truly's harness, is getting ridiculous. "One time," says Cyndi, "someone actually said, 'I know she has a sign on her that says ignore her, but can I pet her?'"

Truly often accumulates more attention than Amber would like, especially in high-traffic areas such as the dining hall. When Amber and Truly arrive at the West Ending Dining Hall on Mexican Night, several eyes turn to her and Truly.

Amber walks from station to station, peering through the glass. She cannot see what the contents hold, but she uses her phone to zoom in on the name cards of each dish. As she passes each station, another person turns to look at Truly with various expressions of shock, confusion and even adoration. The dining hall soon becomes full of not-so-subtle sideways glances and craning necks.

After several minutes of consideration, Amber steps into the burrito line as she tries to



each table, bodies turn fully around in their seats to watch as Amber and Truly pass. More whispers ensue as Amber sets down her plate on an empty table and makes her way back up to the soda fountain.

As she passes a large, round table full of students, a young woman with brown hair turns around and says to her friends, “Man, I really want to pet that dog.”

By the time Amber makes it back to her table to begin eating, she has already been assaulted with countless odd looks and been the subject of

read the toppings list from too far away. Pulling out her phone, a group of three young women get in line behind Amber and do a double take when they see Truly.

One of the members of the group, who had started to drift away toward the salad bar, is called back by the girl behind Amber.

“Macy, I have a secret,” she not so quietly whispers to her friend.

Macy comes back and leans in toward her friend. Her friend begins to whisper in a low tone, but mentions of dogs can be heard here and there. Suddenly, Macy pulls her head back and laughs.

“Yeah, me neither,” she says.

Amber continues to mind her own business. Even though she is aware of the whispers, she is so used to it that it doesn’t even faze her anymore.

After Amber receives her burrito, the crowd parts ways to allow her and Truly to get through. One young man, caught in the middle of the shifting crowd, halts in front of Amber. He looks down, pushing his modern horn-rimmed glasses back up his nose, and smiles.

“Aaaaw,” he says.

Amber quickly moves around him, looking for a table. She navigates her way through throngs of students chatting about their day. As she moves by

several whispered conversations.

“[It’s] usually worse at the beginning of the semester,” says Amber, who is a junior adapted curriculum special education major. “As the semester goes on, people become slightly less interested.”

Amber remembers one time in the dining hall in particular when a young woman barked at Truly. “We walked by and some girl barked at her and that sparked a whole conversation at her table,” Amber says.

Moments like those make it hard for Amber to be confident when going out alone with Truly. The anxieties Amber has developed all stem from one negative experience with the management of a Greenville fast food restaurant. On two separate occasions, Amber and her family were told they had to leave because they could not bring a dog to the establishment. The restaurant’s manager refused to speak to them herself because she was afraid of dogs.

“The second time it happened, we didn’t even make it through the door,” says Amber. “All of the management and cashiers were yelling at us, telling us we couldn’t have Truly in there. It is so embarrassing to have the entire attention of a restaurant on you all at once and you haven’t done anything wrong.”

According to North Carolina statutes, a blind per-

son has the guaranteed right to “be accompanied by a dog guide in all public accommodations and on all transportation,” basically making the actions of the fast food manager illegal.

Lisa Pase, an independent living specialist and advocate with the Disability Advocates and Resource Center in Greenville, says that those statutes apply to more than just blind service dog handlers.

“People think automatically that a guide dog is for someone who is blind,” says Pase. “A service animal helps someone with disability. An animal could help someone with anxiety or something of that nature.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was created in 1990 and until 2011, only dogs were considered service animals. “We call them service animals under the ADA because, in 2011, miniature horses were listed as service animals,” Pase says.

Despite Amber’s anxieties about going out in public with Truly, her best friend, Kim Dana, a sophomore sociology major, says that Amber’s personality doesn’t show that anxiety at all. “I think Amber is very strong and when people say something about Truly, she carries herself very well and she stays very composed,” says Kim.

At the time, Amber made several phone calls to the restaurant’s corporate headquarters as well as

the ADA hotline, but the issue remains unsolved. Taking matters into her own hands, Amber decided to revisit the infamous restaurant.

“I’m ready to fight them on it if they give me a hard time,” says Amber.

As Amber gets out of the car, she adjusts Truly’s harness, takes a deep breath, and marches right through the restaurant’s front door like she owns the place.

Instead of being met with resistance as she was expecting, she is met with a chorus of “Welcome to Popeye’s.” Even the manager walking down the hall stops to ask Amber how she is doing.

Amber places her order, collects her food, and finds a table all without complication. Other than a few sideways glances from some of the customers milling about the dining area, everything is normal. “Well that was anti-climactic,” Amber says, giggling and sliding into a booth. “They must be under new management.”

Amber finishes her meal and takes one final walk to refill her cup. Nobody says a single word to her, not even as she exits the building. Amber has a big grin on her face as she walks to the car.

“That,” Amber says, “was satisfying.” ■

