

SPECIALREPORT

Life with Esme, the guide dog

My Paper follows blind psychotherapist Cassandra Chiu and guide dog Esme around on a typical day out and about

IN THEIR SHOES



TEXT BY JOY FANG
PHOTOS BY ONG WEE JIN

LAST Saturday, psychotherapist Cassandra Chiu made the news when her Facebook post about how she was treated at a Forever 21 clothing outlet went viral.

Ms Chiu, who is blind, had her guide dog with her at the store, and was repeatedly stopped by staff.

Such incidences, sadly, are common in her life.

"Many Singaporeans have not understood or accepted the use of a guide dog. They are not ready yet," said Ms Chiu, who is the second person in Singapore to be matched with a guide dog.

Under the law, such dogs are allowed everywhere, including on MRT trains, in hospitals and in halal restaurants, except hospital operating theatres and the zoo.

But the 33-year-old said she often faces negative reactions whenever she takes Esme, her Labrador guide dog, into shops, eateries and other indoor public places.

She has been scolded and refused entry into places when Esme is with her. Once, at International Plaza, she and her friends were rejected by three restaurants in a row.

When this happens, she tries to show the staff the legislation regarding guide dogs and her Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped member's identification card, in order to explain her need for a guide dog, usually to no avail.

Once, she was even pushed down an escalator by an angry shopper who couldn't understand why Ms Chiu had to take a dog into a mall. Ms Chiu had to be tended to by paramedics.

That is why there are few guide dogs here, as blind people are unable to get past the fear of rejection, she said.

Ultimately, it is "down to the retail manager of the shop and how understanding and sympathetic he is to the use of a guide dog", she said.

"Many basically don't care, even though there is legislation in place."

This is unlike in countries such as the United States, Australia or Japan, where rejecting a blind person with a guide dog can be seen as discrimination. A company or person who treats a person with a guide dog differently can be subject to prosecution.

A DAY IN HER LIFE

The truth is that Esme has been a "lifesaver" for Ms Chiu, who suffers from Stargardt disease, a genetic macular degeneration that causes progressive vision loss.

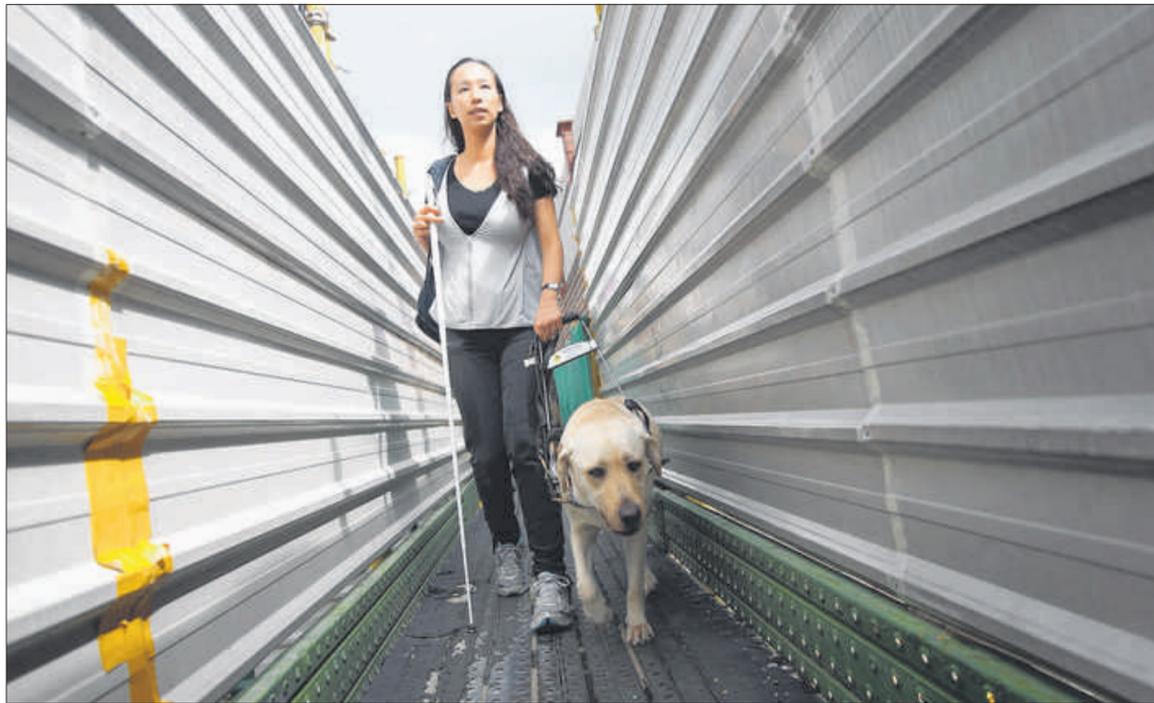
Each day, she brushes her teeth, prepares breakfast and escorts her daughter, Kady, to her school bus, saying goodbye to the six-year-old with a kiss.

Then she makes her way to work from her Bukit Panjang flat to her clinic at Tanglin Shopping Centre, via bus.

This morning routine is performed by millions every day. But for Ms Chiu, the journey to work is filled with intricate challenges that require careful navigation.

Last November, after a year of waiting, she was matched up with Esme. Today, life is definitely easier. Before the dog came into her life, she suffered her fair share of scrapes and injuries from knocks and falls.

Once, she fractured her skull after she walked into a lamp post, which she swore "was a brand-new one erected overnight", she



INDISPENSABLE: Guide dog Esme helps its handler, Ms Cassandra Chiu, navigate the path around a construction site near King's Road after church service. Ms Chiu describes the dog as "an extension of me".



10.05am STARTING OUT: Esme, after helping to find a seat at a bus stop for Ms Chiu, waits for further instructions.

said, laughing.

Now, she can manoeuvre her way around obstacles as Esme is trained to steer her away, by putting its body between Ms Chiu and the object.

With Esme, she is able to make her way around Singapore independently, coupled with the use of other senses.

"You listen for cars and, with people and objects, you can sense that there is a static space where air cannot pass through," said the psychotherapist, who added that she was set on getting a guide dog as she wanted her life to be improved.

The woman - who holds a Master in Social Science from Swinburne University of Technology,

Melbourne - was given her golden opportunity last year, when the Guide Dogs Association of the Blind offered to sponsor the training fees for Esme, which can cost more than \$50,000.

Ms Chiu pays for Esme's upkeep.

BRED FOR THE JOB

Esme comes from the lineage of guide dogs from Guide Dogs Victoria in Melbourne, where dogs are bred for their intelligence, temperament and willingness to work.

The criterion is stringent - pups begin basic training at six weeks old, from dog obedience to navigation and social skills. After a year, they are assessed on their suitability for official training as a



guide dog. They must have qualities such as a gentle nature with no violent tendencies.

Only 30 per cent of the litter gets picked. The chosen pups go through 10 months of guide-dog training - learning how to locate steps, kerbs and turns, how to avoid obstacles and working with a human partner.

Ms Chiu spent a month training with Esme in Melbourne, before heading home to spend a month with a trainer here to get the three-year-old Labrador acquainted with the country.

While Esme is a curious and affectionate dog off-duty, it is professional and skilful when doing

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12.00pm PLAYTIME: Esme is quiet and alert while on the job, but in Ms Chiu's clinic at Tanglin Shopping Centre, it is at ease, and enjoys a good dose of affection from its handler.



4.45pm THE JOURNEY HOME: On bus 190 en route to Bukit Panjang, curious eyes are on Ms Chiu and Esme. Ms Chiu says not many people realise that Esme is a guide dog.



4.10pm SUBTLE SIGNALS: While on the escalator of Isetan at Shaw House, Esme tilts its body towards Ms Chiu to let her know that it is not the time to move off the escalator yet.

11.15am

SAFETY MEASURES: At a junction along Tanglin Road, Ms Chiu listens for audio prompts, but also relies on Esme to know whether it is safe to cross the road.

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its job, guiding its handler to empty seats and across the road safely.

All it takes is a tiny pat on its backside and the disciplined pooch instantly flops to the floor, quiet and alert for the next instruction.

When My Paper followed Ms Chiu and Esme on a day out last month, one thing became clear: She does not allow her impairment to slow her down.

She walks decisively and quickly, making her way across pathways as confidently as a sighted person. But it's Esme that made that possible.

"I always call Esme my yellow

Ferrari... I really enjoy the freedom of going where I want and not being limited by my disability."

A GUIDE DOG'S ROLE

The relationship between Esme and its owner is clear.

Esme is protective of Ms Chiu's well-being, while Ms Chiu adores the dog for its loyalty.

She recounted an occasion when she ignored Esme's instructions during the initial stages of training in Victoria. It had slowed down and nudged her, when approaching stairs at the training grounds.

Ms Chiu had proceeded, not realising the dog had indicated the presence of stairs. The result was that the former took a tumble.

Now, whenever Esme notices that its handler isn't slowing down in similar instances, it uses its body to block her from going further.

Ms Chiu describes their relationship as "symbiotic".

"She is an extension of me. We're like Siamese twins."

On negative incidents that have plagued Ms Chiu when taking Esme out, Ms Lim Meow Luan, general manager of the Guide Dogs Association of the Blind, said that there is a "lack of awareness that a guide dog is not a pet".

She said that many don't realise that the dog "is an indispensable guide" for the blind handler, and this misunderstanding "restricts the guide-dog handler's movements, and prevents him or



5.30pm STARES: At a supermarket in Bukit Panjang, many glare at the pair. Just wanting to get her shopping done, Ms Chiu pretends not to hear some people exclaim that a dog isn't allowed there.

» Guide Dogs Association of the Blind

The association, which helps match blind people with guide dogs, was founded in 2006 by Mr Kua Cheng Hock, a blind businessman. He was the first in Singapore to get a guide dog.

The association helps source for guide dogs and matches them to those who are mobile enough to handle one, after they have undergone orientation courses and mobility training.

It also regularly organises talks with schools, organisations and companies to dispel misconceptions about guide dogs.

To find out more, visit the association at 10, Anson Road, International Plaza, #21-09; visit its website www.guidedogs.org.sg/, or call 6423-0217.

HELP DESK 我的字典

Guide dog: 导盲犬
dǎo máng quǎn

Discrimination: 歧视 qí shì

Lineage: 血统 xuè tǒng

Acceptance: 接受 jiē shòu

joyfang@sph.com.sg

her from leading a dignified and independent life when access to certain places is given at the mercy or generosity of business operators".

There are tactile markers for the blind on the streets and at MRT stations, but some are incorrectly aligned or are incomplete, which may be dangerous to the blind person, she added.

Audible signals at some traffic lights are also turned off after a certain time and not all such signals are turned on at traffic junctions, she added. A guide dog helps its handler navigate these.

Ms Lim, like Ms Chiu, hopes to see greater education for the acceptance of guide dogs.

As for Ms Chiu, all she asks is that she and Esme be allowed into

stores and eateries without hindrance - just as sighted people are. "I might be blind but I'm human too... I want to show that we have a right to live and move freely, like every one else."