

Israel Guide Dog Center History

The Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind (IGDCB) began as a dream of a young paratrooper in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). A lifelong animal lover, Noach Braun trained dogs in the IDF for military purposes.

When Noach left the military, he dreamed of continuing to work with animals—but only for man's greater good. To his surprise, Noach discovered that there was no guide dog school in Israel. There had been a woman who trained guide dogs in the 1960's named Dr. Rudolphina Menzl however, when she passed away, the program was abandoned. Noach decided to make it his life's mission to reestablish a guide dog school in Israel—so all blind or visually impaired Israelis could obtain the mobility, independence and companionship that only a guide dog can provide. Prior to opening our center in 1991, a visually impaired Israeli had to go to Jerusalem to pass an English test.



If they understood English well enough, they were then sent to the USA or UK for a month of instruction with a guide dog. Not only was this hard on their families, but the dogs were not trained to handle obstacles and challenges found only in Israel—traffic circles, cars parked on sidewalks, security barriers, aggressive drivers, warning sirens and other issues that simply do not exist in other countries. Plus, the dogs were trained in English, not Hebrew.

When we match a guide dog with a visually impaired person, we call it a “Partnership.” But Noach would never have realized his dream without creating other partnerships as well. “I was lucky to meet Norman Leventhal, and many other people who have joined together to make this center a reality.”

The two met at the home of the Leventhal family in Pennsylvania on the first night of Hanukah in 1986. Norman was immediately drawn to Noach's vision of establishing a guide dog school in Israel, and paved the way for Noach to study to become a guide dog trainer. At the same time Noach's wife Orna began studying dog breeding. After they completed their studies in the United States, Noach and Orna traveled to Great Britain, where they completed their studies. In 1991 they returned to Israel to establish the Israel Guide Dog Center.

The center began operating from a rented house in Kfar Yedidiah, a moshav near Netanya. Two dogs were donated and trained by Noach, and the first blind clients trained with their dogs while living in Noach and Orna's home. A guide dog school in the United States donated two breeding females, and the first breeding stock was established.

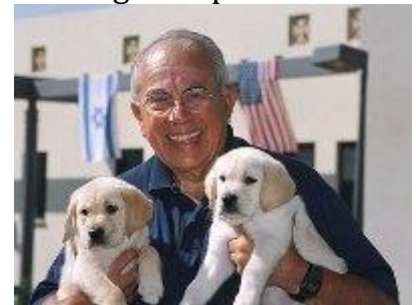
In 1994 a plot of agricultural land was purchased near Moshav Beit Oved, and the Israel Guide Dog Center moved to its present location. The first kennels were built and trailer homes were purchased to provide housing for the center's administrative offices and lodging for clients. In 2001 a generous contribution by Lady Elizabeth Kaye of London enabled the construction of the purpose-built accessible building that now houses the center's offices, student guest rooms, and other facilities.

Noach's Journey

At age 26, Noach went to America—on his own—to find a guide dog school that would teach him the necessary skills to become an instructor. Naively, he expected that “When I arrived in New York, there would be a huge sign saying ‘Welcome Noach,’ and someone would show me the way.”

Instead, he found many obstacles and considerable disappointment. Back then, Noach didn't speak English well and not many people were willing to help him in his quest. To make ends meet, he walked dogs and worked for a moving company. He also volunteered at the Jewish Guild for the Blind in New York City. “I think I'm the only Israeli to ever volunteer there,” said Noach.

Noach called on the ten major guide dog training facilities in America. Devastated when each rejected his request to be an apprentice, Noach almost gave up on his dream. In a last ditch effort, he turned to the Israeli Consulate in New York for help. He met Yeshaya Barzel, Consul in charge of the Soviet Jewry desk, and asked if there were any way he could help. Yeshaya regretted he couldn't but suggested contacting Norman Leventhal, z”l, a well-connected Pennsylvania businessman active in Jewish causes.



Norman had no experience with visually impaired people. He didn't know anyone who was blind and had never seen a working guide dog. What he did have was a strong commitment to the Jewish community and assisting people in need.

When Yeshaya reached out to Norman and asked him to meet Noach, Norman replied, “I have a lot of things on my plate; the last thing I need is another project.” Yeshaya said, “Meet him. Maybe you can point him in the right direction.”

Norman invited Noach to join his family for dinner on the first night of Chanukah in 1986. As Norman later put it, “I never met a man who was more focused on helping others. He was the true definition of a mensch. I had to help him.”

Norman called several guide dog schools—only to receive the same frosty responses—but with persistence he finally got a yes from the Director of Pilot Dogs in Columbus, Ohio, who agreed to accept Noach into their guide dog mobility instructor training program. Thus did a dream develop.

After a year-and-a-half of instruction at Pilot Dogs and with the assistance of Tamar Perkins, a guide dog user and the founder of the Israel Guide Dog Users’ Association, Noach completed his training at the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (GDBA – now known as UK Guide Dog Schools). At the end of 1990, Noach became a certified Guide Dog Mobility Instructor.

While Noach was learning to be an instructor, his wife Orna was learning how to establish the dog breeding program. Orna has been a full partner in the process and is now Director of Animal Services. At the same time, Norman started a non-profit organization to raise funds in the U.S. so they could establish a guide dog training program in Israel. Their heads full of knowledge, Noach and Orna returned to Israel to continue the journey.

When Saddam Hussein started lobbing scud missiles into Israel from Iraq, Norman and Noach’s quest to find a place to build a school was interrupted—and Noach was called back into his IDF unit. After Noach returned to civilian life weeks later, they found a small house in Kfar Yedidya, a moshav near Netanya. The Israel Guide Dog Center was born, and Noach started training our first dog, Tillie, a Yellow Lab provided by the GDBA in the UK.



After Tillie was trained, Noach invited Haim Tsur to be his first client. Tsur, a concert violinist from Jerusalem met Noach at Pilot Dogs, and was a veteran guide dog owner. Already on his fifth guide dog, he lived with Noach’s family while receiving his instruction, graduating with Tillie at his side in 1991.

Eventually, we outgrew the small house on the moshav and moved the Center to Beit Oved, just south of Tel Aviv between Rishon Lezion and Yavne, in 1994. Surrounded by orange groves, and with few neighbors, it was adjacent to the Ayanot Agricultural School. Construction began on kennels for the puppies, followed by the purchase of four caravans (mobile homes) where students lived during training.

A few years later, as a result of a major gift from Lady Elizabeth Kaye (photo) of London, the Lady Kaye Student Center was designed, built and completed in 2004 with six student bedrooms, a dining room, kitchen, student lounge, meeting rooms, and staff offices. Today, we proud to report we have created hundreds of “Partnerships” between blind or visually impaired Israelis and guide dogs, directly touching the lives of thousands of Israelis. Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind is the only internationally accredited guide dog school in Israel—and a full member of the International Guide Dog Federation. The Center also provides Service Companion Dogs to autistic or blind children, IDF soldiers with PTSD, and other Israelis with special needs.



While a great deal has been accomplished, much more is needed to reduce the length of time people spend on our waiting list. In 2016, we began construction on the adjacent property that will allow us to increase the number of dogs we train and Partnerships we create.

The Israel Guide Dog Center is supported by Friends organizations in Israel, US, UK and Canada. Norman passed away in February 2020, his son Steven Leventhal now serves as President of the organization, while Martin Segal heads the British Friends of the IGDCB, Atarah Derrick is Director of the Canadian Friends of the IGDCB, and guide dog owner Haim Shwartz is currently Chairman of the Israel Board of Directors. Norman’s son Michael volunteered for 23 years as our database manager and bookkeeper – later becoming Executive Director for 13 years, but after 36 years of service retired in 2023. Gail Androphy is the current Executive Director in the USA to help carry on this inspiring legacy.

Noach’s journey teaches us two important lessons: 1) dreams can become reality through dedication and hard work, along with help from good and caring people; 2) each and every person can make a difference and change the world.

This is why it is vital to teach our children about Tikkun Olam – Repairing the World. We can all help others and should lend our support to make the world a better place. This is how the Israel Guide Dog Center began, and why we continue our vital work today.