

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

## RVA Man Spent Months in Israel Helping Guide Dog Center

February 4, 2024



In the wake of the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, most people “didn’t know what to do,” said Ephraim Seidman, 69, who was born in Norfolk but now lives in Richmond’s Museum District.

But Seidman immediately realized he could put to good use his connections in Israel and his experience raising puppies to become guide dogs for the blind.

“I knew I could do something concrete,” said Seidman, who previously had spent a year living in Jerusalem and who, alongside his wife, has raised eight puppies that ultimately became guide dogs for people with visual impairments. “I felt I had no choice but to go,” he added.

Seidman’s story is one of risks and rewards: weathering the threats of war — missile strikes and all — for the sake of his community and, of course, for the love of pups.

### **Raising guide dogs**

Seidman described the process of preparing a puppy to become a guide dog as one of the most fulfilling things a person can do.

The work begins, Seidman said, long before the dogs are old enough to start their formal guide dog training. Before a dog can learn to navigate surface and pedestrian traffic; avoid curbs, low-hanging branches and other hazards; and find doors and exits — skills Seidman calls “magic” — the dog must be properly socialized.

And that’s where the Seidmans come in.

“You’re looking (to) impart in the dog good house manners, teach them some commands, teach them how to act in public,” Seidman explained of the role of the puppy raiser. “(You’re) mak(ing) sure the dog is self-confident, knows its skills, knows how to act in different situations ... that it’s well-balanced and good at dealing with distractions and the chaos of the outside world.”

It is just like owning a dog, Seidman said. But it is also completely different, because once the dog is old enough, it must be returned so it can begin its training and, eventually, be assigned to a partner who is blind.

“The dog was never yours,” Seidman said. “It’s hard to understand and accept, but it’s part of the deal. It’s a dog in your house, in your heart, in your family, but it’s not really your dog.”



Ephraim Seidman meets Frank for the first time. Seidman's family previously made a donation to the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind that allowed the family to name a puppy. They named the puppy Frank after Seidman's great-great-grandmother, Fruma, after whom Seidman is also named.

Center for the Blind.

The center breeds and equips dogs for several specific purposes, according to Gail Androphy, executive U.S. director of the organization. The dogs are trained as guides for people who are visually impaired, service dogs for veterans and soldiers with PTSD, and emotional support dogs for children on the autism spectrum or with special needs.



Puppies play in a dedicated playroom at the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind.

PROVIDED

Surrendering the dogs is

“heartbreaking,” Seidman said, “but you need to think of the big picture: “the life-changing impact your dog is going to have on somebody else.”

The Seidmans would know. They have done it eight times. It is a contribution to society in which they believe deeply: one that has provided them both with meaning and pride, despite the sorrow.

### Service dogs in Israel

Seidman and his wife spent 2014 living in Jerusalem. Seidman had already spent a combined eight years periodically living in Israel — starting in 1973, after the Yom Kippur War, when he spent six months carrot and citrus farming on a small kibbutz, and then again in the late 1970s and early '80s. He had always wanted to go back.

By 2014, the couple had already raised three puppies to be guide dogs. It was something they wanted to continue doing, Seidman said, so they reached out to the Israel Guide Dog

The rigorous training at the center in Beit Oved kicks off when the dogs are about a year and a half old — as soon as the puppy raisers are done with them, Androphy said. It lasts for up to five months. Once they have completed the program, the dogs are placed with partners in their homes, where the center continues to assist in preparing the dogs for their 8-year careers.

“Our work is amazing,” Androphy said. “We are not just cute puppies. We are dogs that are changing people’s lives every single day.”

In partnership with the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind, Seidman and his wife helped raise more puppies, which “got (them) into the family” of the center, he said.

Despite returning to Virginia, the pair have stayed in touch with the center ever since.

### **‘I just had a pit in my stomach’**

Seidman was on a camping trip with a friend on Oct. 7, 2023, the day that Hamas attacks on Israel left around 1,200 people dead. “I just had a pit in my stomach,” Seidman said. “I couldn’t believe (it). I figured, ‘I’m still asleep, and this is a nightmare, because there’s no way this is happening.’”

Seidman cut his camping trip short and returned home, where he spent time reflecting on how he ought to respond to the events. He was already considering contacting the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind to volunteer when his wife “very perceptively” asked him if he was thinking about going.

“And I said ‘I am,’” Seidman recalled. His wife was “generous and brave,” Seidman said, and encouraged him to help in any way he could. So he called the center and, as soon as he was able, he was on a plane to Israel.

Androphy said accepting his offer was a “no-brainer.”

“It was so nice ... to see that there was support from America,” she said.

### **‘It will be okay’**

Seidman flew to Israel in mid-October with little to no idea what he would actually be doing. As it turned out, he would be doing a little bit of everything.

The greatest need, he said, was transportation. At any one time, the center oversees between 150 and 180 puppies, distributed to puppy raisers scattered throughout Israel. But many of those puppy raisers were called up to serve in the Israel Defense Forces when the war broke out, Seidman said, creating a logistical nightmare for the center.



These dogs are taking part in a ceremony called a "Gius," in which puppy raisers "give up their pups" and return them to the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind. Ephraim Seidman called it a "very emotional day."

PROVIDED

Those puppies and all of their belongings had to be collected and returned to the center, Seidman said. The scale of the task was overwhelming, but he gritted his teeth and set to work, shuttling dogs back and forth between the center, their initial hosts and temporary placements around the country.

People were afraid to drive because of the prospect of rocket attacks, Seidman said. Already, a rocket had landed citrus grove behind the center. While Seidman initially was concerned about the danger, he said that would change as the weeks wore on.

“When there are rocket attacks on the road, your car, full of is a bomb,” Seidman said. “You get out of the car, lie down the side of the road and put your hands over your head.”

On one occasion, as Seidman was driving at night in the “pitch black,” he received an alert on his phone warning to seek shelter immediately.

“Bail, get out of the car,” Seidman remembered thinking. He pulled over, crouched on the side of the road and watched the Iron Dome take out a rocket directly over his head. It was the most scared he has ever been. “My heart was racing,” he recounted. “Where did (the shrapnel) go? I don’t know. But since I’m talking to you, I can tell you it didn’t hit me.”

On another occasion, Seidman was dispatched to the home of a man who was killed by Hamas militants at a music festival in Re’im. The man had been paired with a dog from the center, Seidman said, and it was Seidman’s job to retrieve the dog’s belongings.

When he arrived, he said he found the man’s mother “on the floor crying, packing up a box of his personal items.”

“And she saw I was crying, so she stands up and gives me a hug, and tells me ‘it will be okay,’” Seidman said through tears. “I don’t know how she did that. It breaks my heart to this day.” But for all the horror and grief, Seidman said there were wonderful moments as well — hardly surprising, given his proximity to puppies.



Puppies sleep in a "puppy pile" in the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind Puppy House.

PROVIDED

in a  
not

gas,  
on

him

Seidman spent hours in the puppy kennels, he said — that is where he would go on a bad day. He also brought dogs to evacuation zones, where families who have been displaced due to the conflict are living, so that the dogs could play with the children, interact with the parents and “make everyone feel better.”

“It almost felt normal, in a terrible situation,” Seidman said. “One day I was on my face and, the next day, I was smiling.”



Puppies at the guide dog center are collected in a basket so their litter boxes can be cleaned.  
PROVIDED

### **‘We cannot stop now’**

After more than two months in Israel, Seidman returned home on Christmas Day. He needed to decompress, he said, and to recover from some of the things he had witnessed. And he felt a strong pull to come back to his wife and his dogs — retired guide dogs that the couple raised years ago.

“The whole country is in trauma right now,” Seidman said. “It’s not a good place, not a safe place to be.”

“No one in Israel likes this war,” he went on. “No one wants to see the death and destruction in Gaza. No one wants to see the Israeli soldiers who are constantly being lost. Everybody wants to see the hostages come back.”



Ephraim Seidman nuzzles Alan, a guide dog he raised who moved back in with him after retiring on Friday.

Margo Wagner, TIMES-DISPATCH



A dog from the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind interacts with families who were evacuated from a city on the Israel-Lebanon border.  
PROVIDED

Androphy said everyone at the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind was grateful for all that Seidman had done for them.

“He was really so incredibly helpful,” said Androphy, who emphasized the importance of the center’s work in the midst of the widening crisis.

“We cannot stop now,” she said. “If we stop now, then we will not have dogs in two years. We know that there have already been ... soldiers who have been blinded ... and others who will come back from the war with PTSD. So we have to continue.”

For Seidman’s part, a second trip is on the table. But for now, he needs to rest.

“It was incredibly gratifying,” he said. “It was also incredibly challenging.”



Ephraim Seidman gives instructions to Woz, a guide dog he raised who retired and moved back in with him.

Margo Wagner, TIMES-DISPATCH