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After Going Blind, Starting a New Career With Help From Two Guide Dogs

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York

Times Lloyd Burlingame, a Broadway set designer until he went blind, has written a book about the experiences of his two guide dogs, including Kemp, and how they have managed to steer him safely on the streets of Manhattan.

Lloyd Burlingame was in the prime of his career as a prominent Broadway set designer and the chair of the design department at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, when something ended all that.

He went blind.

It happened gradually, beginning in the late 1980s. By the late 1990s, he began using a cane, until one day a cruel jokester advised him that it was safe to cross a busy stretch of Seventh Avenue, only to laugh as Mr. Burlingame was nearly hit by a cab.

Mr. Burlingame, 77, essentially retreated to his apartment for six months until a friend took him to the [Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library](#) on West 20th Street, where he was told that he could be paired with a guide dog at [The Seeing Eye](#) guide-dog school in Morristown, N.J.

Today Mr. Burlingame is on his second dog – first Hickory, now Kemp – and they have led him out of darkness and into a series of daily adventures in the big city, which he has chronicled in a new book called [“Two Seeing Eye Dogs Take Manhattan! A Love Story.”](#)

He insists that the book, which is self-published and available online, was actually written by his two dogs, who are the book's narrators. It was selected recently to be recorded for an audio version by the Heiskell library, a branch of the New York Public Library.

"Going blind isn't something I'd wish on anyone, but one thing has led to another in a positive way," he said recently while visiting the library's sound studio, where his book was being recorded by an actor, A.J. Stetson.

Mr. Burlingame lost his sight as a result of Stargardt's disease, and it was a crushing blow — a crushing blow for a man who designed his first Broadway show at age 25 and became a main designer for the famous Broadway producer David Merrick, including the shows "Philadelphia, Here I Come" and "Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Marat/Sade."

As his sight was deteriorating, Mr. Burlingame started painting; some of his artwork was on display at the Heiskell library. (Some of his work was ruined by Hurricane Sandy, because it was in a ground-floor storage unit in Chelsea that was flooded).

"For a visual artist to lose his sight and then reinvent himself like Lloyd has, I thought our other library users would like to read about that," said Susan Mosakowski, a playwright and theater producer who runs the Heiskell library's book-recording program, which makes versions of books that are not available in audio form.

This is the first time the library has recorded an adult book about being blind that was written by one of its patrons, Ms. Mosakowski said

The book essentially begins with Mr. Burlingame visiting The Seeing Eye and working with one of its few dogs unflappable enough to work in Manhattan: a yellow Labrador named Hickory. He needed to avoid being rattled by the many distractions like bike messengers, police sirens, truck back-firings, huge lunch crowds, construction crews and people trying to pet him.

For Mr. Burlingame, Hickory's big test was that spot on Seventh Avenue where he was nearly hit by a cab. Hickory aced the crossing, and Mr. Burlingame included it in the journal he had begun about his guide-dog experiences that evolved into the book.

The early entries were boring, he said, "but I realized they wouldn't be boring if it was told from the dog's point of view. You really get plugged into the dog in a special way, so it's like living two lives."

He found that people — friends and strangers alike — who had heard about him, loved these serialized adventures of being sightless in New York and soon, his periodical entries were being shared, by e-mail, with more than 80 fans and friends. They followed along when after eight years of service, Hickory was adopted by a family and Mr. Burlingame was paired with Kemp, a Labrador-golden retriever mix who has been with him for six years.

Stories included the time at Carnegie Hall when Hickory broke into a high-pitched howl to sing along with soprano Renée Fleming. Mr. Burlingame is an opera buff, and both Hickory and Kemp have been with him to performances dozens of times. In April, Kemp's wagging tail kept thumping a woman next to them, who was "not amused," Mr. Burlingame recalled on a recent weekday as Kemp guided him out of his East Ninth Street apartment on errands, first to the pharmacy to buy some shampoo and then to the liquor store for a bottle of vodka.

With each approach of a curb, the dog stopped, and Mr. Burlingame listened to the whoosh of traffic, to determine the timing of the green traffic light, a test that is tougher when traffic is light.

"I guess I'm the only person in New York who wants more traffic," he said, adding that having a guide dog is like a marriage. "It's a wonderful way to lead an independent life."

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My mother got her degree from Columbia Teachers' College in 1943 with the assistance of a boxer the first of her five Seeing Eye dogs. Her years teaching kindergarten at the New York Institute for the Blind attest to her remarkable work.