

GB man finds new freedom with guide dog

Now he's taking strides towards independence. Last month, Johnson graduated from "Guide Dogs of the Desert," a California based program uniting guide dogs with the disabled.

"They give you so much independence and freedom," Johnson said.

"Once I met Dale and started working with him, I realized that he had some unique challenges, things that I wasn't professionally prepared to work with," said Bob Wendler, Guide Dogs of the Desert director of canine operations.

So the organization decided to partner with a dog academy out of Madison to make sure Johnson and his dog get the specialized training they need. Instructors from both groups are in Green Bay for the week to help.

"Whatever Dale's specific needs are, we will work with him and help Sarge accomplish those tasks," said Nicole Meadowcroft, Custom Canine Service Dog Academy president.

Those things include aiding Johnson with balance and command work.

"Targeting several different locations that Dale goes to on a regular basis, and teaching the dog how to specifically locate those doorways," Wendler said.

Johnson and Sarge have only been hand and leash for about three weeks, but the trainers say their progress is astounding.

"Just the relationship and the bond they have together is so heartwarming and it's such an inspiration," Meadowcroft said.

Johnson knows the path towards more independence won't be easy, but with Sarge at his side it's now within reach.

"Now that I have a dog again, I'll be able to get to those places more freely," Johnson said.

The trainers say it usually takes six months to a year for owners and their guide dogs to be fully connected. While Johnson's special needs will make some things more difficult, they see no reason why this would be any different.

Heather Sawaski reports.